The New Criterion

October 1991

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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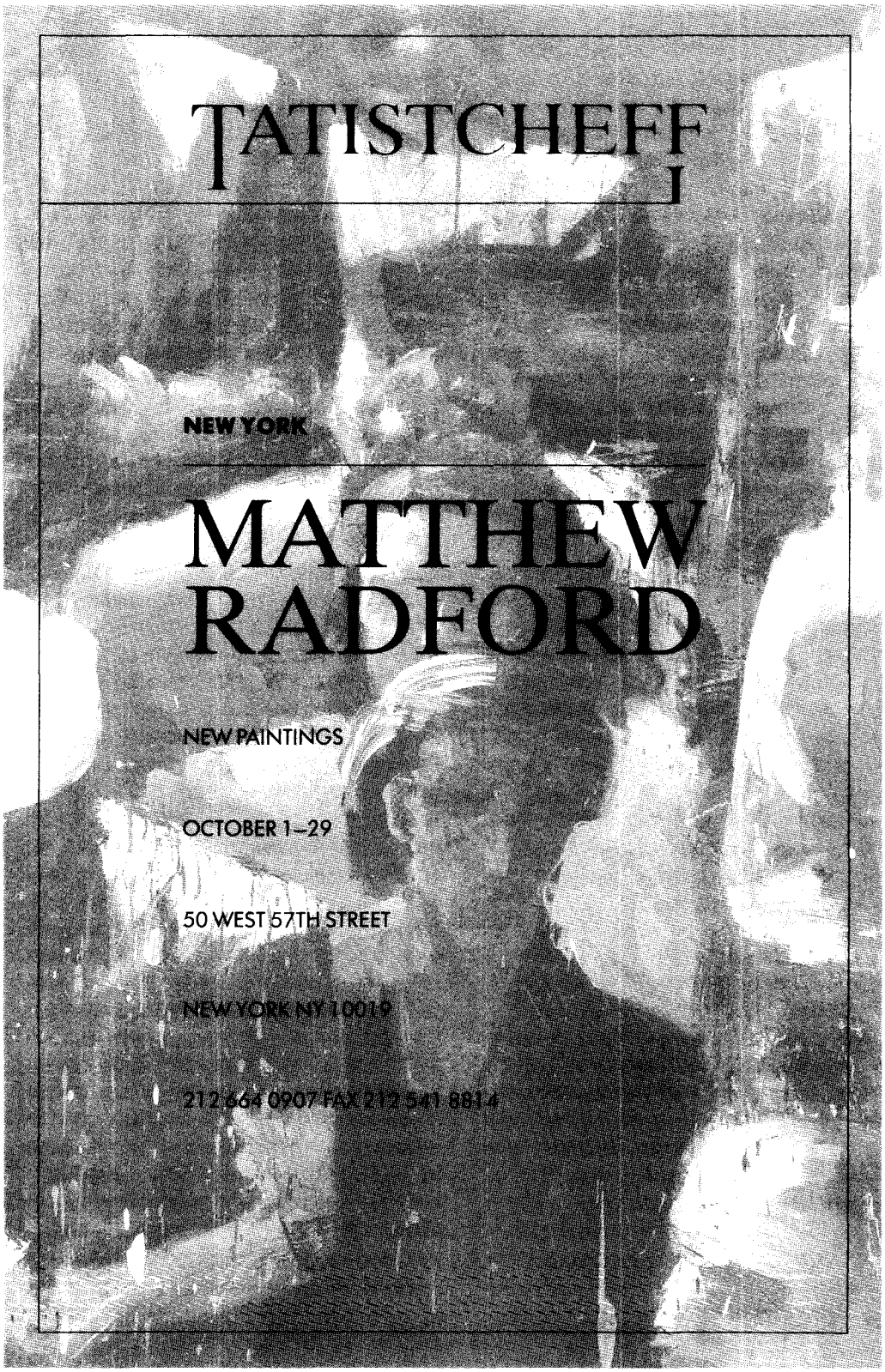

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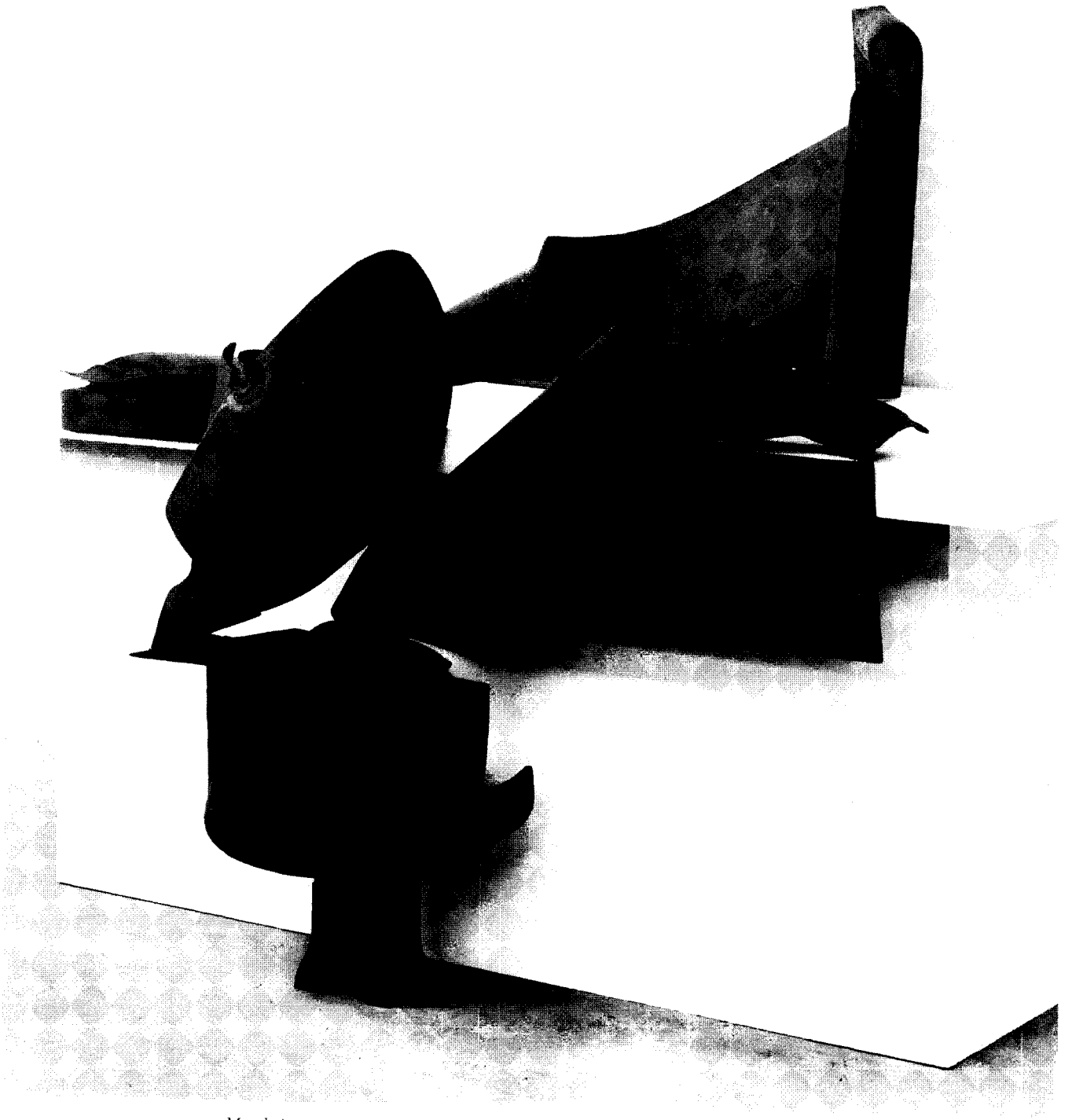

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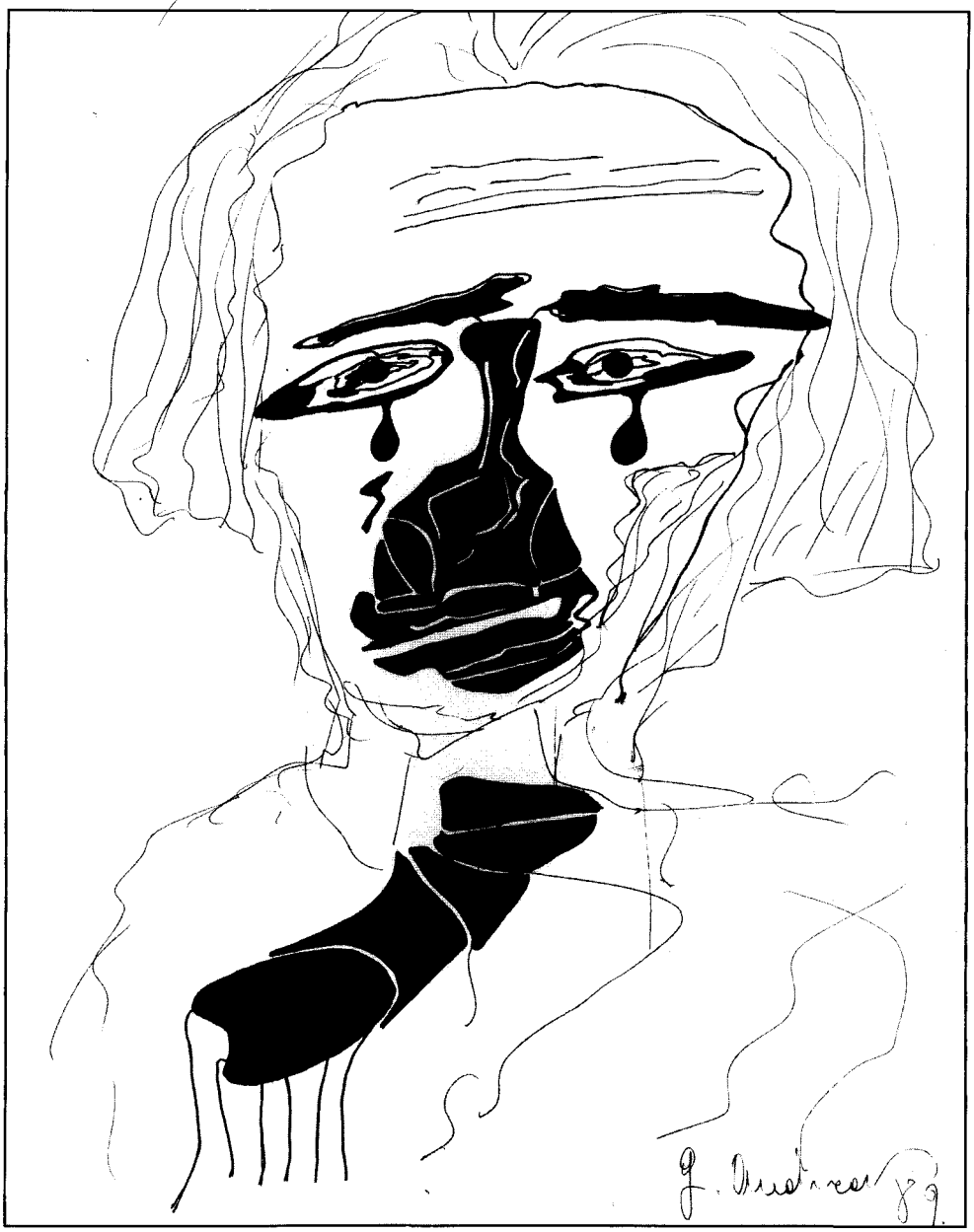

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Notes & Comments: October 1991

Post-Communist radicalism and the cultural revolution

Of the many things to be noted about the fall of Communism in the Soviet Empire, which for much of the twentieth century functioned as the principal instigator, orchestrator, and beneficiary of radical movements the world over, perhaps the most important for the future of American intellectual life is the fact that this momentous development cannot be expected to alter or deter the ambitions of the cultural revolution at home. On the contrary, the new tack taken by the political Left in this country has been to associate the crimes of Communism with the *anti*-Communist movement at home while at the same time declaring its own radical agenda free from the criminal ideology that for so long served as its impetus. In other words, the habits of mendacity acquired during the long years of service to the myth of socialism and other ruinous revolutionary chimeras have remained inviolate and unexamined despite the demise of Communism at its principal seat of power in the world.

One recent utterance from the American academic-political Left may be taken as an indication of the strategy likely to be adopted by post-Communist radicalism in this country. Last month, in the course of a special round-table debate about political correctness that appeared on the television program "Firing Line," Professor Stanley Fish of Duke University likened Neo-Conservative critics of political correctness to the hard-line Communist "conservatives" who organized the failed August coup in Moscow. Thus, in a breathtaking example of Orwellian falsification, a prominent academic radical characterized those who have dared to defend the rights of free speech and freedom of assembly on campus as totalitarian enemies of freedom even as he acquitted the academic thought police enforcing such abridgments of basic democratic liberties of any wrongdoing.

With a statement of this kind, which unconscionably stigmatizes the longstanding opponents of Communist tyranny as the oppressors of *our* liberties, we are given a glimpse of the way the champions of post-Communist radicalism in this country are preparing to deal with the fateful collapse of the Communist ideal abroad. They are simply going to lie about the historical record. They are going to misrepresent their own political allegiances, and discover more and more parallels—utterly false parallels—between the now discredited practices of Communism and the imperfections of our own democratic capitalist society. What we are about to see, in other words, is a revival and revision of the Left's tattered old theory

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of "moral equivalence," which claimed that the policies of the U.S. were essentially indistinguishable from those of the USSR. In another example of the kind of Orwellian subterfuge we can expect to hear more of in the future, liberals have already been claiming that the "supply-side" economic policies of the 1980s were no different from the catastrophic economic policies of the Communist Party in the USSR—a "line" that would not get much of a hearing, we suspect, in Moscow or Saint Petersburg today.

This, then, is the new "spin" that is to be given to the fall of Communism by the liberal and radical Left in this country—that is, by those who have spearheaded the cultural revolution in the universities and the media and who now shape the liberal agenda. Since it had always been the view of the radical Left that the problems afflicting the world scene had little to do with Communism but much to do with the actions and policies of the American government and the capitalist system, this latest tack is, in one respect, only an updated variation of the same old anti-American ideology that has been a familiar feature of the Left for decades. What is new, however, is the conflation of Communist and capitalist evils, a conflation that exonerates the Left of its shameful history of support for Communist tyrannies everywhere in the world even as it indicts American democracy for crimes akin to those committed by the worst Communist regimes.

This new line is, mercifully, unlikely to win much support from the public at large. But elsewhere in our society—and most especially in the cultural revolution that is now being played out in the classrooms, the newspapers, the television and radio stations, the foundations, and other agencies of social and cultural influence—the victories continue to belong to the radicals. In the aftermath of events in Russia and Eastern Europe, this cultural revolution has now clearly sanctioned a rewriting of history in which the United States rather than the Soviet Union emerges as the real "evil empire" of our time. Professor Fish and his cohorts have shown us how it will be done.

The Everyman aura

The announcement some months ago that the publishing firm Alfred A. Knopf intended to revive the venerable Everyman's Library was greeted with great enthusiasm throughout the publishing world and indeed by what we used to be able to call the literate public. This was hardly surprising. Launched in London in 1906 by the indefatigable publisher Joseph M. Dent with Ernest Rhys as the first editor, Everyman's Library was one of the most ambitious as well as one of the most successful publishing ventures of the century. By the time that it stopped publishing in 1975, Everyman's Library comprised nearly a thousand titles and had sold more than sixty million volumes. But Everyman's was not merely a fortunate business scheme: it was also a noble cultural enterprise, a culmination of late-Victorian high-mindedness and benevolent didacticism. As John Gross wrote in *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, "Other reprint publishers merely published reprints; Everyman's Library was an institution, a benign presence, a crusade."

At the center of the crusade was a belief in the civilizing force of high culture in a democratic society. The original plan for the series was breathtaking in scope, calling for a thousand titles to be published in batches of fifty and sold at what Dent referred to as "the Democratic Shilling." George Grote's *History of Greece* was reprinted in twelve volumes, Richard Hakluyt's accounts of English maritime explorations and voyages appeared in eight. There was a new translation of Livy in six volumes, editions of Homer and Aristophanes and Xenophon

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and Plutarch. One could find selections from the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato in Everyman's Library, as well the novels of Jane Austen and Emile Zola, the plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Dante, Goethe, and Shelley, the essays of Hazlitt and Goldsmith, and on and on.

Physically, the books were sturdy, portable affairs, well made and clearly printed though hardly lavish; they were intelligently edited and contained a brief but straightforward and useful introduction that situated the author and his work. Early editions contained various edifying mottoes from classical authors; all bore the Library's motto, drawn from a medieval morality play: "Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide, in thy most need to go by thy side." The books were designed, in other words, for readers and students, for those pursuing their studies outside the academy even more than for those within. The distinctive look of the books as well as the frank didacticism and lofty educational aims of the series contributed much to what John Gross called "the special Everyman aura."

While Knopf plans to add some modern titles—Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, for example—the new series is mostly culled from the original Everyman's list. The new books boast full-cloth covers, sewn bindings, ribbon page markers, silk-bead headbands, and—most important—acid-free paper. Priced between $15 and $20, they sell for a good bit more than the "Democratic Shilling" that Dent hoped for, yet by today's standards, when a shoddy paperback with instant-yellow pages can be $12 or $15, they are still something of a bargain. The new Everymans, which began appearing this September and will be published at the rate of one hundred titles a year, each come with an annotated bibliography, author's chronology, and newly commissioned introduction by (in the words of a press release) one of "today's leading writers and scholars." Clearly, the publisher has gone to considerable lengths to endow the revamped Everyman's Library with an up-to-date version of that special Everyman "aura."

Why, then, does the entire project have a slightly meretricious look and feel? No doubt it is partly due to such details as typography. The new Everymans have not been re-set: they have been indifferently reproduced from earlier editions (and not always from the texts published in Everyman's Library). This questionable and disfiguring procedure is lamentable yet perhaps justified as a cost-saving measure. But, at least in the samples we have seen, Knopf has also elected to set the new introductions and other front matter in a typeface different from that used in the text proper. The typeface used for the introduction to *Pride and Prejudice*, the first volume to appear in the new series, has been described by one eminent graphic designer as "worse than atrocious." Moreover, the discrepancy between the type in the introduction and the text makes rather a travesty of the Library's show of elegance, revealing the cloth covers, silk-bead headbands, and other ornaments to be little more than a kind of fakery, like those "genuine faux-leather" bindings offered by some book clubs. Then, too, there is no assurance that the texts themselves are the best available: this is a small consideration for most twentieth-century works, perhaps, but it is very important indeed for anything written before 1850. Not, however, that one can easily tell: the new Everymans that we've seen do not even specify which text has been used.

There is also the question of the newly commissioned introductions. Will they serve students as a reliable entrée to an unfamilar author? Consider, for example, the introduction to *Pride and Prejudice* by the Oxford don Peter Conrad. This "leading scholar and writer" begins by telling us that "Jane Austen's is an extended, exploratory, dan-

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gerously subversive art." Poor Jane Austen, bluntly enlisted as a late-twentieth-century academic radical! Expatiating on the famous Austen irony, Mr. Conrad even contrives to rob one of the most lucid writers of English prose of elementary clarity: "As always," he assures us, "she means the opposite of what she says." On one page, quoting Kierkegaard, Mr. Conrad suggests that irony is "the incognito of the moralist." On the next page we learn that irony is "also the incognito of the immoralist," e.g., "immoralists" like, well, like Austen's heroine, Elizabeth Bennet. Nor is Mr. Conrad without his share of windy profundities: "The great novelist is generally one whose characters are too volatile and various and too rapt in their own delighted self-discovery to endure control." Right. Just think of the "delighted self-discovery" enjoyed by the characters in Dostoevky's novels, or Joseph Conrad's, or Henry James's, or Franz Kafka's, or Edith Wharton's. Imagine: Ethan Frome as the merry narcissist.

But while design details and introductions like Mr. Conrad's may make one want to change the Library's motto to "Everyman, go away!" the real problem lies elsewhere. Asked why Knopf had decided to reissue Everyman's Library, Knopf's editor in chief, Sonny Mehta—the man who brought us Bret Easton Ellis's repulsively chic *American Psycho* last spring—explained in a press release that "Consumers have grown tired of the chic and trendy and are interested, once again, in what's classic and enduring." That is, according to Mr. Mehta, it is now trendy to seem untrendy; this season's gambit is to adopt the pose of supporting "what's classic and enduring." Unlike, say, the Library of America or the Bollingen series, the new Everyman's Library is largely an imitation of a serious publishing enterprise.

Will the Knopf Everyman's Library find room for twelve volumes of Grote's *History of Greece*? Will it commission new translations of Livy or other classical authors to include in the series? We very much doubt it, because a publisher needn't undertake such protracted and expensive ventures in order to sell books. If the original Everyman's Library acquired a "special aura," it was because it was a magnificently idealistic publishing venture. Attempting to recapture—or at least to exploit—the aura without the intellectual and moral commitment that produced it, Knopf is simply poaching on a legacy of greatness. Its publicity mills have been diligently churning out paeans to the rebirth of a legendary publishing venture. But what we really have in the new Everyman's Library is a cynical counterfeit.

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"Degenerate Art" and the war against modernism

by Hilton Kramer

In the history of modernist art in the early decades of this century, the fate suffered by avant-garde artists first in Russia and then in Germany constitutes a particularly cruel and ironic chapter. In no other societies of the Western world were the achievements of the avant-garde so rapidly and programmatically elevated to a position of authority in the institutions of cultural life. Yet in no other societies was modernism so totally and violently repudiated. The methods employed, first by Stalin and then by Hitler, to remove all trace of modernist influence from the cultural and political life of their respective domains may have differed in certain respects, but the result, which succeeded in making modernism a political crime, was the same. For the artists and art officials who faced the prospect of arrest, the concentration camp, and the firing squad, it hardly mattered whether the charge was "bourgeois formalism" or "*Kulturbolschewismus.*" It was the totalitarian state that would now determine what was permissible in the realm of art and culture, and in both societies immense new bureaucracies were created to enforce official programs, reward compliance, and punish deviation.

How different it had been before the nightmare descended. In Russia, in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, the avant-garde had been made the official custodian of the nation's artistic affairs, with jurisdiction over the museums, the art schools, the publishing houses, and the funds to support their activities. In Germany, in the tumultuous era of the Weimar Republic, the modernists' command of cultural life may have been less official, or less centralized anyway, but was scarcely less comprehensive. It was in Germany in the decade and a half following the end of the First World War that institutions essential to the dissemination of modernist art were created in considerable numbers. It was indeed in this defeated and demoralized nation that the first public collections of modernist art were established on a significant scale. The very idea of the modern museum as we know it today—an art institution of advanced design that specializes in the acquisition, exhibition, and publication of the visual arts of the modern era—was largely the creation of this extraordinary period in German cultural history.

These were not developments that were unopposed even before the final crackdowns, however. In Russia, modernism never enjoyed popular support either before or after the Revolution of 1917. The allegiance to a more traditional art, realistic in style and populist in subject matter, remained a powerful force. The avant-garde was no sooner given extraordinary powers by the new Soviet regime, moreover, than it began to split into political factions committed to conflicting views about what the proper function of art should be in a Communist society. The most vociferous faction favored the abandonment of fine art al-

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together in favor of an applied art—now dubbed "productivist" art in the Communist jargon of the day—that would serve as a propaganda tool for Soviet collectivism. This faction, which was commanded by some illustrious talents, had already gained the upper hand years before Stalin buried the whole modernist movement in the cultural wasteland called Socialist Realism.

The opposition to modernism in pre-Hitler Germany was even more complicated. Some of the opposition must be attributed, of course, to common philistinism, which, in a society less bitterly divided against itself than the Weimar Republic was, might conceivably have remained politically inconsequential. But in the political maelstrom of Germany in the Twenties, even the kind of philistinism that derived from benighted taste and cultural complacency rather than from a clearly defined ideological animus could have no hope of remaining politically benign. It thus found itself allied with the lethal reactionary and proto-fascist political forces in Weimar Germany that looked upon modernist art, as upon virtually every other manifestation of modern cosmopolitan culture, as an odious symptom of the racial, sexual, and moral "decadence" they were determined to extirpate from German life.

It wasn't only philistines, reactionaries, and fascists who looked upon modernism as a subversive threat to German society. Much of the German avant-garde proudly shared this view of its own endeavors. German modernism was, in fact, more fiercely political in many of its manifestations than its counterparts were, for example, in France or the United States. But then, the German situation was vastly different. The nation had been vanquished in the war. It had then passed through its own brief and aborted Bolshevik-style revolution. As a result, political passions remained at fever pitch, and touched almost every aspect of art and culture. German Dada, which from the outset had been an anti-war movement, remained politically radical in a way that Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray were not. The artists of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* group in the Twenties were similarly committed. German Dada and the *Neue Sachlichkeit* were closely allied with the extreme Left, and the Bauhaus, too, was "socialist" in its general outlook and even harbored a powerful Communist faction in the last stages of its history.

But the political passions of the German avant-garde did not belong exclusively or unambiguously to the extreme Left. How, for instance, are we to characterize the politics of German Expressionism, which was the real fulcrum of the modernist movement in Germany? This is not an easy subject to talk about because German Expressionism became one of the primary targets of Hitler's war against modernism, and it loomed larger than any other movement in the mammoth "Degenerate Art" exhibition that Hitler staged in Munich in 1937 for the express purpose of discrediting modernism and branding it a crime against the German people. Yet in the extensive catalogue that accompanies the exhibition called "'Degenerate Art': The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany," which has been touring American museums this year, we are reminded more than once that at the outset of Hitler's ascension to power there were arguments raging in the highest councils of the Nazi leadership in favor of embracing German Expressionism as an authentic example of the Nordic spirit.[1] Stephanie Barron, who organized this grim commemoration of the "Degenerate Art" exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art earlier this year, describes the debate in which Goebbels, of all people, argued as the champion of Expressionism.

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1 "'Degenerate Art': The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany" has already been seen at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (February 17-May 12) and the Art Institute of Chicago (June 22-September 8). It will be on view in Washington—in the International Gallery of the Smithsonian's S. Dillon Ripley Center, 11 Jefferson Drive, S.W.—from October 16 through January 5. The accompanying catalogue is published by LACMA and Harry N. Abrams (423 pages, $75; $34.95 paper).

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> There emerged in 1934 some confusion about the "official" attitude toward the Expressionists, artists such as Barlach and Nolde in particular. Some factions saw this art as truly German and Nordic, with roots in the Gothic era. Goebbels initially sided with these proponents, in fact, he surrounded himself with examples of Barlach's sculpture and Nolde's painting; he saw the spirit and chaos of Expressionism as analogous to the spirit of Nazi youth. At extreme odds with him was Rosenberg, who sought to promote *völkisch* art (art of and for the German people) over any type of modern aesthetic. Goebbels and Rosenberg took opposing sides in their speeches and writings, neither yet sure of the Fuhrer's opinion.

Christoph Zuschlag, in an essay for the catalogue that traces the history of the anti-modernist exhibitions in Nazi Germany that preceded the "Degenerate Art" extravaganza, also discusses the divisions caused by the dissension over Expressionism.

> The argument over Expressionism also reflected differences of opinion within the [Nazi] leadership itself concerning the way in which cultural politics should be allowed to develop. The principal disputants were Propagandaminister Goebbels and the founder of the Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur, Alfred Rosenberg. In spite of Hitler's radical rejection of a more liberal approach to modern art at the [Nazi] party rallies in 1933 and 1934, this conflict continued to simmer until 1936 or 1937. . . . Not until 1937 was the whistle finally blown on the artistic avant-garde in Germany.

When we add to this the fact that Emil Nolde, one of the leading Expressionist painters who was to see over a thousand of his works confiscated by the Nazis from the German museums in 1937, had actually joined the National Socialist party as early as 1920 and remained an ardent follower of the Nazis in everything but their treatment of his own work—for he, too, came to occupy an important place in the "Degenerate Art" exhibition—we can appreciate, perhaps, the conundrum involved in assigning to the Expressionism movement in Germany any simple political label.

The truth is that German Expressionism, like certain other aspects of the German avant-garde, was a curious conflation of radical and reactionary elements. Its hatred of bourgeois life, and its implacable rejection of everything associated with mercantile and industrial civilization, allied Expressionism with the political Left, and yet its dream of a mythic past in which mankind—or perhaps one should say a *Männerbund*—lived in an idyllic state of nature unencumbered by the corruptions of culture and modernity had a certain appeal for the more primitive aspects of Nazism.[2] What finally made Expressionism as loathsome to Hitler and his gang as any other manifestation of modernism was the very cosmopolitanism that Expressionists like Nolde mistakenly believed they had transcended. The modernist acolytes of Nazism did not really comprehend the nature of the cultural revolution that Hitler, like Stalin in this respect, envisioned for the future of his totalitarian empire—a cultural revolution that was to be defined by a special brand of kitsch, kitsch in the service of a political mythology that embraced every aspect of life and thought.

This exhibition on "The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany," together with the sizable catalogue that Stephanie Barron has edited to accompany it, does more to illuminate the German chapter of this history of the totalitarian war against modernism than anything else I have seen or read. Owing both to its copious documentation of the 1937 Munich exhibition, about a quarter of which has been meticulously reconstructed for this occasion, and to the materials it has brought together on developments in Germany before and after the "Degenerate Art" show itself, Barron's

2 In an essay for the catalogue of the current exhibition, George L. Mosse speaks of the importance for the Nazis of the idea of "a *Männerbund*, a league of men, an institution that had a long tradition in Germany."

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prodigious feat of research has significantly advanced our understanding of this crucial episode in modern history. On everything from the activities and acquisitions of the modern-art museums in Germany in the pre-Hitler period to the sale of confiscated works of art in Switzerland after the close of the "Degenerate Art" exhibition to detailed accounts of the individual artists represented in the show, this ambitious, many-sided project unearths new information and sheds new light.

A good deal of attention is also given to the campaign waged against modern music, films, and books, to the many artists in all fields who went into exile—a significant number, of course, fled to the United States—and to the smaller roster of distinguished figures who chose to collaborate with the Nazis. Included, too, is some newsreel film of what was called the "Great Exhibition of German Art," the show of officially approved Nazi art—mainly heroic figures rendered in a style that owed much to Hitler's taste for kitsch—that was staged concurrently with the "Degenerate Art" show, but with considerably more pomp and ceremony, in the newly constructed House of German Art in Munich.

It needs to be understood that the "Degenerate Art" show was one of the largest surveys of modern art to be mounted in Europe at that time, and that its purpose was twofold: not only to impugn the art itself as degenerate and corrupting, but to illustrate what the Nazis saw, or claimed to see, as the moral depravity of both the artists who produced it and the professionals—the curators, critics, dealers, collectors, and intellectual admirers—who supported it. With characteristic efficiency, the Nazis had confiscated some sixteen thousand works of art from thirty-two public art collections in Germany since taking power in 1933, and from this immense haul 650 objects were selected for the 1937 exhibition. These were crowded into ten rooms of the Archeological Institute in Munich, and to many of the objects were attached vulgar, hand-written labels that viciously ridiculed the art and deplored the sums of money that had been spent on it. By all accounts, the exhibition was one of the most bizarre art events of the modern era—a massive display expressly designed to horrify and enrage the public—and it drew a huge attendance. By the time the exhibition had completed its tour of twelve German cities four years later, nearly three million people had seen this mammoth survey of Kandinsky, Nolde, Kirchner, Chagall, Kokoschka, Klee, Feininger, Corinth, Beckmann, Schlemmer, Schwitters, Schmidt-Rottluff, Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy, Lissitzky, Grosz, Dix, and many lesser figures of the modern movement—a far larger number, by the way, than bothered to attend the "Great Exhibition of German Art" that triumphantly affirmed the Nazi alternative to modernism.

In the current exhibition, 175 works from the original show have been installed in seven rooms that are thematically arranged to reflect the categories used in Munich in 1937. Yet I doubt that I was alone in finding the documentary sections of the current survey more compelling than the galleries devoted to the art itself. We do not come to an exhibition of this sort, after all, primarily for the purposes of aesthetic delectation. This is an exhibition about an historic attempt to destroy art, and while it offers us some welcome moral gratification to see how much of the art actually survived this concentrated assault, the art itself—or a very large part of it, anyway—is now so familiar to museumgoers that it cannot give us much in the way of a fresh revelation.

Then, too, there is the problem of the art itself. While there is no shortage of masterworks in the show, it must be acknowledged that there is no shortage of works of poor quality as well. It could scarcely have been otherwise. The Nazi bureaucrats who organized the Munich show were anything but connoisseurs of modernist art. Like the ideological bullies of our own time, who insist on judging every work of art by some standard of political correctness, the Nazis selected work for the "Degenerate Art" show on the basis of subject matter or race

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or some other non-aesthetic standard. Some of these objects turned out to be works of genius, but many others were not.

In the end, what is most conspicuously missing from this examination and reconstruction of the "Degenerate Art" exhibition and its period is a vividly conveyed sense of the larger history to which the Nazis' war against modernism belongs. It was Stalin who launched this war in earnest before Hitler even came to power, and it was a war that continued to be waged in the Soviet Union for decades after Hitler was crushed and West Germany, anyway, emerged as a democratic state with a liberal cultural life. To what extent Hitler may have set out to emulate the cultural program that Stalin had already set in motion by the early Thirties, we shall probably never know. We do know that the Soviet regime provided the Nazis with a political model for total control of every aspect of life. As Paul Johnson wrote in *Modern Times*, "With the mature Soviet model to guide him, Hitler set up the apparatus of terror and the machinery of the police state even more quickly than Lenin —and soon on a scale almost as large as Stalin's." Stalin in fact destroyed the Russian avant-garde even before Hitler acquired the means of destroying its German counterpart, and their histories were intimately linked. Yet there is no sense of this in either the current exhibition or its catalogue, where the parallel fate of the Russian avant-garde is accorded scarcely more than a line or two and the relation between the two is unexplored. This is all the more surprising in that Stephanie Barron is herself something of an expert on the Russian avant-garde, having collaborated over a decade ago on a major exhibition of its art. "'Degenerate Art': The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany" is an important contribution to this ghastly chapter of modern history, but the larger story of which it is a part remains to be told.

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Keepers of the flame: the recovery of Russian literature

by Vasily Rudich

On May 2, 1939, Maxim Litvinov, the anti-fascist Soviet Foreign Minister, was fired by Stalin for his opposition to what was to become known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Eight days later a close associate of Litvinov's, the prominent diplomat Evgenii Gnedin, was arrested by the secret police on a fabricated charge of espionage. He refused to confess, even though he was tortured personally by Stalin's chief executioner, Lavrentii Beria. Gnedin's memoirs, published in his native land only after the advent of *perestroika*, have joined the ocean of similar testimonies that have recently come to light and continue to terrify the Soviet reader. Gnedin's graphic description of the tortures inflicted upon him, however, remains among the most memorable. Beaten, mutilated, humiliated, he would often faint, but each time, at the very moment of regaining consciousness, he would start murmuring some great poetry that he knew by heart —and thus recover his strength of will. He would most readily recall a sonnet written by the leading Russian symbolist, Vyacheslav Ivanov—a learned, stylized, verbally luxurious poem celebrating Italy, its olives and fountains, its "sacred urns," and a blissful sense of communion with the cultural treasures of the past. "The contents of that poem," writes Gnedin, "had nothing in common either with the reality of prison, or with the world I had lived in before my arrest, or with my entire *Weltanschauung* of that time. But while reciting it to myself, I felt as if it was a prayer." Ethnically a Jew, a hereditary revolutionary as well as a committed atheist, Gnedin triumphed against incredible odds, threatened with insanity and breakdown, by drawing on a cultural experience—the vision of Italy evoked by a Russian, Christian, and deeply religious poet. While reading Gnedin's memoirs, I could not help wondering whether this episode does not in fact refute Theodor Adorno's contention that there is no sense in writing poetry after Auschwitz.

Almost two decades earlier, Vyacheslav Ivanov—the very poet whose work allowed the tortured prisoner to survive spiritually—was engaged in a debate about the meaning of culture. It was an unusual occasion. By 1920, the Communist authorities recognized that the ground was slipping from under their feet and that the nation was on the verge of utter collapse. At that point Lenin started to contemplate the New Economic Policy—his famous plan for a partial restoration of capitalism under the Soviet government's control. To remedy the national economy, the Bolsheviks badly needed, among other things, cooperation on the part of the educated classes who had been until then equated with bourgeois exploiters: they were discriminated against and made the object of verbal and physical abuse. In the wake of Lenin's bid to restore the economy, the government somewhat relaxed the grip of censorship, permitted

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some private publications, and took certain steps to alleviate the dismal material conditions in which "intellectual laborers" lived. The respite, however, was brief. As early as 1922 a large group of distinguished academics and literati, including some European celebrities, were forcibly exiled from their homeland, never to return. Later, their books were forbidden and their very names ritualistically expurgated—that is, excised from handbooks and encyclopedias, in full expectation that they would forever disappear from the national memory. Nonetheless, there was the two-year interval of pretended liberalization. As part of the campaign aimed at the appeasement of intelligentsia, the authorities founded a kind of a sanitarium near Moscow where creative intellectuals, invited for a brief term of residence, were allowed to catch their breath and concentrate on their immediate work. Vyacheslav Ivanov spent several weeks at that place in the summer of 1920, recovering from the ordeal of semi-starvation in revolutionary Moscow. Owing to a lack of space, he had to share a room with an old friend, the eminent historian Mikhail Gershenson, and since they knew that they were both inveterate talkers they decided to write each other a letter a day so that at least something could be produced to justify their short vacation in a time of hardship for all.

Their epistolary exchange resulted in a little book called *Correspondence from Two Corners*, hailed by Ernst Robert Curtius as "the most important pronouncement on humanism since Nietzsche." It was published in German by Martin Buber, in French by Charles Du Bos, and in Spanish by Ortega y Gassett. When translated into English in the late 1940s, and reprinted in this country in the 1980s, it received no critical attention and remains known only to a handful of Slavists.

It is, on the other hand, no accident that in recent years the Ivanov-Gershenson *Correspondence* has attracted considerable public interest in the Soviet Union and has become recognized as one of the most crucial of the newly discovered texts. Reprinted as soon as Mikhail Gorbachev embarked upon his "thermidorian" policies of reconciliation with the historical and cultural past, it touched a particularly sensitive nerve: seventy years of spiritual starvation under Communist rule demonstrated that what might initially appear to be just another academic debate about cultural heritage was in fact a matter of national survival.

At the time of his and Ivanov's encounter "across the room," Mikhail Gershenson had become exceedingly disillusioned by the inability of humanistic culture to offer an antidote to the horrors of revolutionary upheaval. An introspective intellectual, he felt exhausted and suffocated by the burden of learning and remorseful about those who were suffering from evils sanctioned by a culture in whose higher accomplishments he delighted. Consequently, he sought inspiration in a "counter-cultural" Rousseauist dream bidding man to consign to oblivion all memory of the past—"of every religious and philosophical system; every trace of wisdom, of doctrine, of the arts and of poetry"—and to become naked—"as the first man was naked"—so that he could lift his arms toward the sky "remembering one thing only out of the past: how tight and stifling were those garments and how free one feels without them."

Although he viewed the issue from a markedly different perspective, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Gershenson's "correspondent," was himself not fully satisfied with what the humanistic culture of his day had to offer. To him, it lacked spiritual rigor and was cut off from the divine. As long as it is subordinate to science, "the great enforcer," culture can indeed be interpreted as a system of subtle coercions—but that would reflect only on its least substantial aspects. But the failures of culture are failures of human nature. This is why no culture can be abolished, but only transcended by means of further spiritual endeavor. Accomplishments, not failures, endow culture with universality: in Vyacheslav Ivanov's beautifully Platonist metaphor, culture is "a ladder of Eros" and "a hierarchy of venerations."

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In 1924 Vyacheslav Ivanov left Russia for Italy, despairing of the educational policies of the new regime. His "fellow questioner," Mikhail Gershenson, died a year later. Both were spared the grim results of the "anti-cultural revolution" carried out by the Bolsheviks. Compared with it, Gershenson's nostalgic anarchism, which Ivanov so eloquently objected to, was child's play. Among the literary and artistic elite of the time, Gershenson was not alone in resenting the canon. As befits a scholar and a gentleman, his tone was soft. But his younger contemporaries, enthralled by fashionable revolutionary phrases, screamed out unabashedly. The first manifesto of the Russian Futurists, characteristically entitled "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (1913), demanded that Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy, and all the rest be thrown off the "ship of modernity." Succumbing to the pathos of modernity, they welcomed the arrival of the Soviets who vowed "to raze the old world to the ground." The grand modernist tradition of *épater les bourgeois* does not exonerate these gifted poets and artists from their role as intellectual hoodlums: the presumed targets of their *épatage* were by this time to be trampled on far more literally by the revolutionary masters. One may recall that their Futurist Italian colleague, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, later became a pillar of Mussolini's fascism. The fate of the Russian avant-gardists was even sadder, fraught with tragic ironies, although one may feel tempted to see it as poetic justice. They were cleverly manipulated by the nefarious forces that they helped to release. Their call to throw overboard the heritage of the past was heeded all too thoroughly: as early as 1918 the cultural commissars banned from schools and libraries numerous authors under the pretext that their books served the ideology of the exploiters. Among the authors so stigmatized were Plato, Dostoevsky, and Sir Walter Scott.

A similar technique was later employed against the avant-gardists despite their pretense to be harbingers of the new, so-called "proletarian," culture. Drawing on the party directive of the moment, their work was denounced as "ultra-leftist" or "ultra-rightist," "anarchist" or "reactionary," "elitist" or merely "rubbish"—charges that resulted in their ostracism, exile, arrest, physical or spiritual death. By their own will, "the grave-diggers of the past" laid the groundwork of what was to become a hideous monument on their own grave: a bone-breaking Socialist Realism ready to crush the slightest deviation, in content or style, from the "politically correct."

It is not surprising that today the Russian intelligentsia is inclined to demystify the 1920s. These are years that still bewitch the Western imagination as the peak of the modern revolutionary culture: a time when, we are told, techno-artistic visionaries like Vladimir Tatlin, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Vladimir Mayakovsky emerged from the ruins of the past to herald a glorious future. In retrospect, however, the achievement of the Russian avant-garde loses much of its luster. Its costly illusion about the new man and a new mankind stands revealed as the imaginary garment of the fairy-tale emperor. Resentment now focuses on figures such as Mayakovsky. Officially sanctified as a giant of world literature after his suicide in 1930, Mayakovsky managed to maintain his readers' allegiance for decades, largely because of his iconoclastic aesthetics and the sheer force of his personality. Even in the 1960s, young dissident poets and their audiences regularly would gather (until dispersed by the authorities) around a monument to him on the Moscow square bearing his name. A notable event of the last few years was the publication of a study by Yuri Karabchievsky which treated Mayakovsky's life and work to that peculiar blend of passion and hatred that one finds only in a disillusioned lover.

Little is now left of the herd of "sacred cows" idolized by Socialist Realism. Its putative father, Maxim Gorky (a writer of considerable power), is currently more respected in the West than in the Soviet Union. Nikolai Ostrovsky, the bedridden author of *How the Steel Was Tempered*—an

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exemplary novel published in the 1930s portraying the "sentimental education" of a young Communist fanatic—is at best treated as a freak today. It was only a few years ago, however, that one of my Soviet guests was genuinely surprised that this book is out of print in the United States. The Nobel Prize winner Mikhail Sholokhov remains an enigma. How could the same man have written in his youth an acknowledged masterpiece—*Quiet Flows the Don*—and have demanded in his old age that the dissident writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Iulii Daniel be executed by a firing squad? Innumerable others rapidly sank into oblivion. Those still living are threatened with the loss of their huge royalties, which until recently were subsidized by the state. (In the Soviet Union, a writer is paid in advance by the publisher according to a book's print run, which is determined independently of its market value.) Some, like the versatile Sergei Mikhalkov, the creator of volumes of children's verses and of the text chosen by Stalin for the national anthem, try to pretend that everything is fine and cry out—into a sort of void—their fidelity to *perestroika*. Those less cynical either make themselves inconspicuous in order to avoid exposure by the media or join forces with their former ideological antagonists in blaming rotten Jewish liberals for the decay of morals and the collapse of the motherland.

Vyacheslav Ivanov aptly defined culture as "a cult of memory." The rise and fall of Socialist Realism proves that memory is immune to external force. It is vulnerable only to our own indolence, negligence, and self-indulgence. Even when "voluntarily enforced" ideology attained its triumph and reigned supreme over the hearts and minds of millions, the custodians of culture (who are nowadays often angrily dismissed as an "elite") retreated into shadows and catacombs in order to to keep its flame alive.

Communism claims to have inherited and absorbed all the best of mankind's creative achievements. Consequently, the Soviets could not publicly afford the directness of an Alfred Rosenberg, who at the sound of the word "culture" wanted to reach for his gun. This created a predicament they never succeeded in resolving. The regime's ideologues did not shrink from burning books when it seemed expedient, but they preferred to manipulate their meaning. They correctly perceived a powerful threat to their ideology in the universalist values embodied in the European—and the Russian—tradition. Great works of art and literature cried out against the contempt for and abuse of human life practiced by the government. Many dissidents proudly declared at their trials that their attitudes were shaped by reading Pushkin, Gogol, or Tolstoy. A friend of mine received a long prison term under Stalin for copying a translation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 66 ("Tir'd with all this, for restful death I cry . . ."): this, you see, was interpreted as calumny of socialist reality and an example of anti-Soviet propaganda. In order to discredit traditional values, the ideologues resorted to a technique derived from so-called "Marxist aesthetics" that still enjoys considerable currency in American academia. It works like this. The claim that every artist in a class society "objectively" expresses the interests of the privileged class to which he belongs, allows one to label any artist "a petty bourgeois abstract humanist," "a clerical opium dealer," etc., when it is politically expedient. This makes aesthetic relativism an extension of the relativistic ethics originated by the "dialectic" of the class struggle, thus justifying the advent of Socialist Realism as the superior art of the liberated masses.

Nevertheless, the ideologues could not simply repudiate the heritage they were threatened by. Never mind that they were a pack of ignoramuses or—worse—renegade members of the intelligentsia: they still needed to legitimize their usurpation of intellectual authority and material privilege. But as ever, the dialectical method may cut both ways. Using the same technique of reading into the texts what is not there, they could suddenly proclaim any great writer —his or her historical limitations granted—a

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precursor of Marxism-Leninism. What was castigated on Monday could thus emerge entirely rehabilitated on Tuesday.

This state of schizophrenia came to an end only in 1985 when Mikhail Gorbachev publicly recognized the priority of universal values over class interests. Humanism ceased to be called "abstract" and "petty bourgeois," and words like "charity," "mercy," and "compassion"—until then disparaged as blinds used by world imperialism to distract the proletariat from the revolutionary struggle—once again assumed their "classless" meaning.

This development dealt a blow to the very heart of the dominant ideology. One cannot, however, fully account for it without paying tribute to the heroism of the men and women whom I earlier referred to as "the keepers of the flame," determined to preserve the integrity of the cultural heritage at all costs. They were deprived of their livelihood, humiliated, hunted down, and physically destroyed. In solitary confinement, they would from memory render into Russian great European epics: thus was produced the standard Russian translation of Byron's *Don Juan*. In concentration camps, they would lecture to their fellow prisoners (some illiterate), saving many of them from despair, on any topic within their competence, from Russian icon-painting to the philosophy of existentialism. Dying from starvation in blockaded Leningrad, they would discuss with a few devoted students the intricacies of Homeric prosody. That was admittedly a narrow current: a thin but indestructible thread linking the transient experience of the present with the immutability of the past and malleability of the future. The keepers of the flame formed a collective repository of national memory. After their heritage was made available, it exploded: and that, more than anything else, precipitated the breakup of totalitarian psychology.

It would be unfair to portray the so-called period of stagnation (1964-1985) under the rule of Brezhnev and his clique as being as culturally stifling as the Stalin era. Khrushchev's "thaw" (1956-1964) encouraged aspirations that would not easily evaporate. The publication of Ilya Ehrenburg's voluminous memoirs *People, Years, Life* acquainted the reading public with the names of many previously unknown giants of modernism, both from the West and from their own immediate past. The surviving keepers of the flame returned to active life and found devoted followers in my generation—that of their grandchildren—who hitherto had suspected that a canon and tradition existed but had little idea of what it actually meant. Now we were given an opportunity to learn, not in the groves of academe presided over by swindlers or villains but in the small kitchens of communal apartments and fervent informal talks lasting until dawn. The age gap did not matter. Those in their early twenties, over the heads of their fathers whom they justly blamed for what happened and accused of spiritual bankruptcy, joined hands with those in their seventies to be initiated in the experience of culture—a uniquely Soviet response to the Oedipal problem.

In later years, the new enlighteners made every effort to implement a program of cultural recovery through official channels. They were even occasionally successful, provided that they were able to enlist in their cause an influential patron from the ranks of the establishment. Thus 1966-67 saw the publication, in a popular journal, of Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*. That this was a work of great complexity did not prevent it from becoming a national best-seller or from opening readers' eyes to the metaphysical aspect of good and evil, the latter having been obscured by decades of ideological intoxication. Very often, however, the partisans of culture faced paranoid censorship. The poems of Osip Mandelstam, arguably Russia's greatest twentieth-century poet, languished for ten years among various editorial boards. When a collection of his poems was finally published (with severe cuts), it was prefaced by a ridiculous introduction in which a

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noted critic claimed, among much else, that in the last years of his life Mandelstam fell victim to a sudden *Wanderlust* that accounts for his constant movements from one part of Russia to another. In fact, Mandelstam was sentenced to administrative exile and later was dispatched to a concentration camp in Siberia where he perished without trace.

The dissident human-rights movement that made its appearance in the late 1960s included many passionate lovers of culture who saw the integrity of tradition as a prerequisite for the awakening of the national conscience. Their efforts, although uncoordinated, stimulated a vast enterprise known as *samizdat*—the underground circulation of a huge number of typewritten or camera-copied texts that were officially proscribed. This phenomenon now stands in need of a competent historian. Thousands of nameless individuals running *samizdat* knowingly risked their welfare in order to promote the free exchange of information. The materials they disseminated belonged to every genre and provenance, from Pyotr Chaadev's "philosophical letters" (Pushkin's contemporary, Chaadev was declared a madman by the czar and placed under medical surveillance, his writings suppressed for more than one hundred years) to an amateur translation of the *Kamasutra*. A sizable portion of *samizdat* came from literature and philosophy originating in the so-called Russian Silver Age—the early decades of this century before the arrival of the Bolsheviks. Summarily condemned by the latter as "decadent and imperialist," that period had witnessed a remarkable renaissance of arts and letters still not fully appreciated in the West.

It is appropriate at this point to recognize the achievement of the Russian diaspora in the preservation of that culture. Without their devout collecting, reprinting, and researching, the legacy of the Silver Age could have been obliterated. The fruits of their labors eventually found their way into Russia, and by means of *samizdat* multiplication reached the reader. It was an incredible time: a friend might provide you, for one night only, with the sixth or seventh carbon copy of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*—so faint as to be barely legible—to be read side by side with the photographed pages of Lev Shestov's religious tract *Sola Fide*, so minuscule that it could be deciphered only with the help of a magnifying glass.

Notwithstanding such excitement, it must be pointed out that in this period only small circles of well-connected intelligentsia in the two capitals had access to cultural materials disapproved of by the authorities. Even, for instance, to peruse an album of reproductions of Kandinsky's or Malevich's paintings in the public library one had to obtain special permission, not given easily. And if by chance the apparatchiks had bestowed a reluctant imprimatur on a volume by a Mandelstam or Bulgakov, it would be printed in an edition so scant as to make it unavailable except via the black market at an exorbitant price. As for *samizdat*, that was an adventure demanding no less stamina than intellectual curiosity: one could be arrested merely for reading or keeping it. Human nature being what it is, a desire for knowledge yielded too often to the instinct for self-preservation.

Rightly or wrongly, Mikhail Gorbachev's message rehabilitating "universal values" was interpreted by the liberal intelligentsia as an inauguration of cultural *laissez faire*. In contrast to Khrushchev's era when every publication had to be negotiated with a whole pyramid of bureaucrats, the early perestroikists, even though it is likely that they solicited some kind of assurance from the very top, chose from the outset to proceed with bold strokes. This resulted in a parade of literary sensations, not only hitherto unheard of but until then inconceivable in the Soviet Union. Predictably, it started with poetry. As someone put it, "a poet in Russia is larger than a poet." In the spring of 1986 the popular periodical *Ogonyok*, under the newly appointed editor Vitaly Korotich, published a selection of poems by Nikolai Gumilev, an almost legendary figure who played a singular role in the dissident imagination. Although it was known, often by

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heart, to lovers of literature across the country, and although many prominent literati argued that Gumilev never wrote a single anti-Communist line, his poetry remained out of print for sixty-five years after his death.

A founder of the acmeist movement that was also represented by Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam, Gumilev was not only a major poet but also a man of exemplary courage. Of delicate frame, he learned to endure hardship, traveling three times to Northern Africa where he would hunt lions and elephants or interfere with the native warfare. At the outbreak of World War I he joined the army as a volunteer and received high military decorations. His poetry mirrors his character: crisp, sonorous, disciplined, it deals with highly Romantic themes such as pirates and conquistadors parading valiantly across magic and exotic lands. Both an Imperialist and a Parnassian—a Rudyard Kipling and a Théophile Gautier rolled into one —Gumilev naturally found himself at odds with the principles of Soviet power. As he predicted in one of his last poems, he died like a hero, executed in August 1921 by the Petrograd Cheka on the charge of involvement in a counter-revolutionary conspiracy. A recent inquiry revealed that his only crime was refusing to inform on his friends.

Gumilev was the most illustrious of the many victims of the Red Terror who could not be explained away by reference to Stalin's betrayal of the Leninist legacy. Everyone knew that he was murdered during Lenin's lifetime. Therefore, despite his patent and lasting impact on the Soviet poetry of this century, Gumilev was written out of official history: it was as if he never existed.

Gumilev's mystique was further enhanced by the subsequent ordeal of his wife, Anna Akhmatova, who became in the eyes of posterity a symbol of spiritual resistance to totalitarianism. Silenced and humiliated by the authorities, having suffered through the triple incarceration of her son, she outlived her tormenters and by the end of her life acquired world fame. Still, her *exegi monumentum*, the cycle of poems "Requiem," created in the darkest years of terror and shown only to a few trusted friends, could be printed in her homeland only in 1987.

It is not surprising, then, that the long-delayed recognition of Gumilev made the intelligentsia ecstatic. They even felt prepared to condone for a while the growing shortage of meat and milk. It led to a chain reaction, as a veritable avalanche of articles, symposia, and exhibitions celebrating the names and achievements of men and women that the average reader had never heard of.

Thus were rescued from official non-being such poets as Maximilian Voloshin, who wrote with pride that his house in the Southern Crimea served, in the bloodiest moments of the Civil War, as an asylum for both reds and whites, "the fanatics of the implacable creeds"; or Vladislav Khodasevich, a somber diagnostician of the modern spiritual malaise who died an exile in Paris; or the acerb Zinaida Hippius, who as early as 1918 predicted that the revolutionary mob would soon be driven back into a pigsty by a master far worse than a czar.

I well recall my amazement at seeing some time in 1987 on facing pages of one journal two profiles: one on the Bolshevik illiterate guerrilla leader, Vasily Chapaev, a protagonist of a famous movie from the 1930s (so famous that he was made the subject of innumerable popular jokes), and the other on Mikhail Kuzmin, an elegant neo-Alexandrian poet, who was earlier exorcised as a symbol of decadence on two unconnected grounds: his professed monarchism and the love of young men that his work celebrates. I found in their peaceful co-existence under one cover not only a sign of "ideological" confusion, but also a proof that the ongoing "cultural Thermidor" had become irreversible.

Poetry was followed by prose, most of it written in Russia or in emigration between the 1930s and 1970s, starting with the appearance in the leading periodical *Novy Mir* of Boris Pasternak's flawed masterpiece

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Doctor Zhivago. Suppressed by Nikita Khrushchev (who acknowledged later in his memoirs that he had not even read it at the time), this novel was subjected to a virulent campaign of abuse that compelled the author to decline the Nobel Prize when he was awarded it in 1959. To appreciate the effect of this recent event, one may imagine for instance that Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, banned in America for twenty years because of its pro-Southern bias, had suddenly been made available to readers who knew of its existence but had never read it.

Public interest in *Doctor Zhivago* was soon superseded by the publication of the works of Andrei Platonov and Vasily Grossman. Neither writer is much known in the West. Platonov, a literary giant, survived the reign of terror by sheer miracle, only to die as a furnace-man in the employ of the Union of Soviet Writers. His novel *Chevengur* casts a strikingly new light on the revolutionary mentality of the very people whom the Bolshevik government claimed to represent —workers and peasants ignorant of the true meaning of their own acts, infantile in both their generosity and their cruelty, victims of a noxious mixture of an ill-digested technocratic utopia, heretical eschatology, and primitive animism. In my opinion, this book must be read by anyone who is interested in the etiology of the Russian revolution, even though Platonov's verbal artistry is ill-served by the incompetence of the only available English translation. Vasily Grossman's anti-fascist novel of 1952, *For the Right Cause*, had been officially acclaimed and nominated for the Stalin prize. But soon thereafter—so goes the dialectic—when a campaign of anti-Semitism broke out anew, he was violently denounced as a "rootless cosmopolitan" by the same critics who had earlier praised his patriotism.

Exasperated, Grossman embarked on a second volume, entitled *Life and Fate*. Written with no attempt at self-censorship, it turned out to be vastly superior to the first, which in retrospect seems little better than standard Socialist Realist fare. Near the moment of its completion, the manuscript was seized by the KGB together with all the carbon paper and even typewriter ribbons. The author died from a heart attack soon thereafter, and it was believed that his work had vanished for good. But it happened that one copy escaped. Entrusted to the writer's friend, it lay buried in a remote country place for twenty years. In the 1970s, it was smuggled to the West. When it finally appeared in Russia, *Life and Fate* aroused a storm of controversy. Its portrayal of the Nazi and Soviet concentration camps as mirror images—with the clear implication that Stalinism was at bottom identical with Hitlerism—was something that many readers, particularly those who belonged to the war generation, still found hard to swallow.

The resurrection of Grossman's novel supports Mikhail Bulgakov's ironically optimistic dictum that "manuscripts do not burn." In *The Master and Margarita* the protagonist, having burned in a moment of despair his novel about Christ and Pontius Pilate, has it restored to him by supernatural intervention. But Bulgakov could hardly have imagined that no less a miracle would in fact happen to him. In the early 1920s, his diary was confiscated by the secret police and was returned to him, after much bustle on his part, only several years later. Disgusted by the thought that his intimate longings were intruded upon by nasty bureaucrats, he committed it to the flames. However, two years ago an accurate typescript copy of that same diary—a fascinating literary document—was discovered in the archives of the KGB: life, as Oscar Wilde might have put it, imitating art.

Until now, we have possessed no authorized version of Osip Mandelstam's satire of Stalin that precipitated his arrest and eventual destruction. Once again, however, the KGB has been the unwitting archivist of culture: they recently made public the text of the epigram, in the poet's own handwriting, that he was forced to produce during his interrogation. One wonders what else might be hidden in the belly of the beast—can it be, as a current joke runs, the second volume of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, de-

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stroyed by him shortly before death in a fit of madness, or eighty-odd lost tragedies of Aeschylus?

It is fitting that this process of cultural revival should have culminated in the vindication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose writings, published in numerous editions and by major journals, are now accessible to millions. His work and personality constitute a battleground between the liberal and conservative camps, the latter, it must be pointed out, unpleasantly xenophobic. Each claims him for an ally in a contest that, if we can believe the newspapers, occasionally ends in fist fights. The public craving for history—frustrated for decades—extends even to Solzhenitsyn's multi-volume series on the origins of the Russian revolution, *The Red Wheel*, which, to put it mildly, makes for difficult reading. The truth about the Soviet period has been falsified so thoroughly that the Ministry of Education had to abolish examinations on the subject in the last year of high school. The bulk of the material published about Stalin's terror now rapidly approaches the accumulated testimony about the holocaust. The all-union society "Memorial" solemnly pledged that every single victim of Stalinism will be commemorated. "Reformed" scholars are busily engaged in producing biographies of Stalin, Khrushchev, Trotsky, Bukharin, and others whose names for many readers, particularly the young, are as clouded in mystery as King Tutankhamen. The Great Soviet Encyclopedia offers an entry on "trotskyism" but none on "Trotsky"; as for Khrushchev, the three-volume handbook on the history of the Communist Party mentioned him only once—on the occasion of his retirement.

What makes the present-day popular passion for history even more remarkable, however, is that it extends further into the past—to the very roots of the Russian experience. The reprint (for the first time after the revolution) of the "History of the Russian State" by Nikolai Karamzin, the founder of national historiography, was met most enthusiastically. This was followed by public outrage at an attempt by the authorities, citing the shortage of paper, to impose a limit on the country-wide subscription to the collected works of the two other major nineteenth-century historians, Sergei Soloviev and Vasily Kliuchevsky. The history-starved audience won: the idea of a limited edition was abandoned. Interest in the *realia* of the bygone ages also accounts for the resurgence of the pre-revolutionary historical novel whose numerous practitioners, like their English and American counterparts, seem to have been thoroughly forgotten. In fact, combining entertainment with instruction, such novels now effectively serve to fill the gaps in people's vision of Russia's past. Finally, all manner of questionable books have been unearthed and eagerly consumed: treatises on the orgies of Ivan the Terrible, inventories of the lovers of Catherine the Great, etc. Readers are delighted by the details of court life and the glamour of high society. The concepts of "monarchy" and "aristocracy" are steadily acquiring a new legitimacy in the public mind, and it remains to be seen whether this will have any political repercussions.

Much has been written about the rebirth of religion in the Soviet Union. The recent policy of reconciliation with the Church is one of very few government actions that still enjoys almost universal support. It is worth noting, however, that this official honeymoon with the Church is not without its perils. The upper echelon of the Moscow Patriarchate is as fraught with corruption as any other branch of Soviet bureaucracy. One can easily imagine that the narrow fundamentalism espoused by certain clergymen will play into the hands of the rabble who wave patriotic banners only to conceal their hatred of others, especially the Jews. Fortunately, extreme nationalism, vociferous as it is, has so far failed to elicit widespread commitment. On the contrary, in their quest for meaning, people have rejoiced in the rich spiritual traditions of Orthodox Christianity, which always existed independently from the Church's subordinate relationship to the state.

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Present-day intellectuals find particular comfort and inspiration in the legacy of Vladimir Soloviev, a contemporary of Dostoevsky who initiated a philosophical and religious movement that flourished in the period before the revolution. This informal movement produced a pleiad of strikingly original thinkers, most of them ignored in the West. I remember a conversation in Moscow many years ago with a taxi driver who confessed that his existence was transformed after he read a *samizdat* collection of essays by Dmitri Merezhkovsky that a passenger accidentally left in his car. Merezhkovsky, who escaped from Russia in 1920, was an ardent propagandist of the "new religious consciousness," a believer in what he called "the Third Testament," the imminent advent of the Church of the Holy Spirit. Between the wars he was a famous name in Europe—Thomas Mann called him "a new prophet coming from the East"—and a strong contender for the Nobel Prize. Nonetheless, his subsequent obscurity seemed irremediable—often he was not included even in the specialized reference books, be they Soviet or American. This makes his momentous return to Russia all the more spectacular: the reprints of his writings rank high on the best-seller lists, surpassing detective novels and science fiction.

There has also been a growth of public interest in other members of the same movement: in Nikolai Berdyaev, for example, a religious existentialist in the vein of Gabriel Marcel and Paul Tillich. The authorities found Berdyaev particularly nettlesome since he started as a proponent of Marxism and then proceeded brilliantly to demolish it. One must mention, too, Vasily Rozanov, a virtuoso stylist and the master of paradox, a *sui generis* precursor of Freud who interpreted and celebrated sexuality from the opposite, that is, metaphysical, perspective. It is said that he died in misery outside post-revolutionary Moscow, one hand grasping the cross, the other a statuette of Aphrodite. Pavel Florensky, the Russian equivalent of Teilhard de Chardin, has likewise enjoyed a renaissance of interest. This distinguished scientist and theologian wrote a formidable apology for Eastern Christianity, played a major role in masterminding Lenin's plan of the electrification of Russia, and later suffered martyrdom in Stalin's Gulag.

A special case is Nikolai Fedorov, who influenced such disparate figures as Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, a pioneer of space exploration, and the composer Aleksandr Scriabin. He was fortunate enough to die before the Bolshevik takeover, content with the life of an ordinary librarian, and acquired notoriety only upon the posthumous publication of a huge assemblage of texts under the title *Philosophy of Common Cause*. His ideas seem exotic to the Western mind, but not necessarily to the Russian. He taught that mankind's ultimate fulfillment requires the eventual resurrection of all the dead, something to be effected by communal effort and with the help of both scientific and mystical procedures. The publicity now given to Fedorov's teaching and its growing popularity may be an instinctive reaction to the failure of that earlier collective super-endeavor, the construction of Communism.

Finally, the appearance of work by Daniil Andreev, hitherto an unknown, has provoked a considerable literary stir. The son of a famous *fin-de-siècle* writer, Andreev was separated by the revolution from his father, who died in Finland in 1919. He fought at the Leningrad front against the Nazis, shortly thereafter was arrested, spent ten years in prison, and died in 1959, two years after his release. It was, most amazingly, in prison that he produced, and managed to conceal from his jailers, most of his oeuvre, including a dozen long poems, a mystery play, and a mythopoetic treatise called *Rosa Mundi*. He claimed to have been visited with a revelation about the nature and structure of the universe according to which a multidimensional material reality is presided over by spiritual entities of a different order; death is merely a transmutation from a lower stage to a higher. A powerful poet in his own right, Andreev articulates this gnostic vision through beautiful imagery that is sometimes reminiscent of William Blake but is for the

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most part original. His futurology, not unlike that of Origen, is optimistic. There is no eternal anguish; at the end of time, the purified and transfigured community of nations will reach Salvaterra—the realm of bliss—and there join in communion with Christ.

The tradition of Christian spirituality and its offshoots survived seventy years of unprecedented onslaught. Even though occasionally fraught with heresy—but for that very reason universalist and ecumenical—it profoundly influenced the thought of the critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who was officially tolerated in his old age but was still not allowed to express himself without equivocation. The last major exponent of this tradition, the Rev. Alexander Men, who earned enormous popularity and respect by his bold advocacy of faith in the time of harassment, was killed last year by a person or persons unknown.

With the collapse of Socialist Realism, Russian literature has entered a period of transition. Only time will tell whether it will be able to absorb its newly discovered heritage and productively transform it. Fashion was never of the same importance in Russia as it is here. The intelligentsia in Russia take equal pleasure from a volume of Borges's short stories (when they can get hold of one) and a seventeenth-century picaresque novel by Grimmelshausen. The lists compiled from the readers' vote of the best books annually published regularly boast such disparate names as Boccaccio, Schiller, and Dickens. Regarding translation from foreign languages, the Soviets had always done very well, though they had to work within the scope sanctioned by the official ideology. Notwithstanding such impediments, virtually every literature in the world is represented in Russian, including such volumes as *The Poetry of Luxembourg* and *Singapore's Younger Writers*. With the breakdown of censorship, this principle of diversity is extended to those who were earlier regarded as *personae non gratae*, like Yukio Mishima, Witold Gombrowicz, or, for that matter, James Joyce (the complete text of *Ulysses* was published in Russian for the first time only in 1989). To date, however, most contemporary Russian literature and art favors traditional forms and is only marginally influenced by the avant-garde. The figure is prominent in painting and sculpture, rhyme prevails in poetry, story and character in prose. All this may change, of course. But the lesson of recent Soviet experience suggests that ideology and culture, although they interact and intertwine, belong to different orbits. The happy moral is that, ultimately, culture is impervious to ideological attack.

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Cleanth Brooks and the New Criticism

by Roger Kimball

[T]he true generalization is not something superimposed upon an accumulation of perceptions; the perceptions do not, in a really appreciative mind, accumulate as a mass, but form themselves as a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure; it is a development of sensibility.
—T. S. Eliot, "The Perfect Critic"

Things are always worse than they seem. Item: In the Summer 1991 issue of the literary quarterly *Raritan*, patient readers will come upon an article about the politics of Wallace Stevens's poem "The Idea of Order at Key West." Perhaps you did not realize that Stevens's lyric had an unexamined political dimension. It doesn't really, you know, but never mind. This is what the typical associate professor's effort has come to these days. The cardinal rule is: never treat literature as literature when you can make it serve some other agenda. The same goes for literary criticism. Thus the splendid associate professor who thinks that "The Idea of Order at Key West" refers to "the disturbed conditions in Cuba" also speaks about "the ultimate attenuation of the New Criticism into a vehicle for cold war quietism and retreat." The Cold War? New Criticism and the Cold War? Has there been some ghastly compositor's error, like the time some bits of a pornographic tale inadvertently got bound into a children's book?

Alas, the obscenity here is of a different, more insidious order. What we are witnessing is the thoughtless repudiation of the most serious and fecund movement in twentieth-century literary criticism, the last important movement in literary criticism that refused to subordinate literature to extra-literary ends. At bottom, the rejection of the New Criticism is also a rejection of modernism. As both its friends and foes have recognized, what has come to be called the New Criticism is the critical coefficient of modernism. What unites them is an insistence on the irreducibility of the aesthetic object: an insistence that literature, for example, is literature, not a covert species of politics.

The animus against this way of thinking has become entrenched in the academy. Consider the British Marxist critic Terry Eagleton. The man who was recently named Wharton Professor of English at Oxford University castigates the New Criticism as "a curious hybrid of critical technocracy and Southern religious-aesthetic conservatism." "In response to the reification of society," Professor Eagleton informs us in his flawless Marxist patter, the "New Criticism triumphantly reified the poem." Translated into English, this means that the New Criticism is at fault for treating poems as . . . well, as poems. Professor Eagleton is hardly alone in his disgruntlement. According to the Duke English professor Frank Lentricchia, the New Criticism was part of a broader effort "to essentialize literary discourse by making it a unique kind of language." That is, the

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New Critics committed the unpardonable sin of treating literary language as something special, something essentially different from, say, the writing one encounters on the back of cereal boxes or in the pages of contemporary literary criticism.

In order to understand the academy's rejection of the New Criticism, one must also understand that literature itself has become something of an embarrassment for academic literary criticism. This is not of course to say that there aren't ever more classes, seminars, conferences, discussion groups, and consciousness-raising sessions *occasioned* by one or another literary topic; nor is it to deny that innumerable studies of literary figures and ostensibly literary subjects continue to spew forth in glorious incontinence from the tenure-producing mills of the academy. But both in the classroom and in their publications, more and more professors of literature betray a profound boredom with literature as such. Indeed, many, perhaps most, will even assure you that the idea of "literature as such" is naïve if not downright distasteful. Literature as an occasion for talking about the suppression of female desire in eighteenth-century English poetry, sure; literature as an opportunity to natter on about the collusion of modernism and Cold War politics, by all means. But literature as something inherently valuable, something worth pursuing for its own sake: no thank you. By itself, unspiced with multicultural pieties or unadorned with "theory" of some sort, literature just doesn't cut it in the academy anymore.

In the end, the repudiation of the idea of literature as a distinct realm of cultural endeavor and achievement rests on a more general repudiation. It rests on the contention that nothing is meaningful or valuable *in itself*, that everything is to be exploited as a version of something else. The supposition underlying this development was summed up with astringent clarity by Stanley Fish, doyen of the Duke English department: "there is no such thing," Professor Fish tells us, "as intrinsic merit." Although often unacknowledged, this version of nihilism has gained a profound foothold in our culture; in the academy it has become a cherished dogma. Only gradually are we becoming aware of the intellectual and moral carnage that it has brought in its wake.

The New Criticism stands in direct opposition to this whole development. And while there is widespread opposition in the academy to everything that the New Criticism stands for, it is important to recognize that the alternatives it represents are still very much alive. The publication of *Historical Evidence and the Reading of Seventeenth-Century Poetry*[1] by Cleanth Brooks, one of the most distinguished and articulate critics associated with the New Criticism, reminds us of this and provides an apt opportunity to review some of the possibilities it offers us in the 1990s. Born in 1906 in Kentucky, Brooks was educated at Vanderbilt and Oxford. He has taught at several colleges and universities, including Texas, Michigan, and Chicago, but is most closely associated with Yale University, where from 1947 to 1975 he was Gray Professor of Rhetoric. He has long been recognized as one of the most important and influential critics of his generation. Among his many books are such classic statements of the New Criticism as *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) and *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947), as well as several books about Faulkner and the textbooks *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, which he co-authored with Robert Penn Warren.

It is worth recalling at the outset that the New Criticism has always been embattled. The *term* was given currency by John Crowe Ransom's book *The New Criticism* (1941). While he mentioned R. P. Blackmur and William Empson, Ransom focused primarily on the criticism of I. A. Richards, Yvor Winters, and T. S. Eliot. The point of the book was to point out deficiencies in the critical approaches these men had adopted and to

1 *Historical Evidence and the Reading of Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, by Cleanth Brooks; University of Missouri Press, 169 pages, $22.50.

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issue a call for an "ontological critic." But Ransom's discriminations were pretty much forgotten as the phrase "new criticism" was taken up and used as a cudgel against such diverse critics as Brooks, I. A. Richards, R. P. Blackmur, Allen Tate, William Empson, Robert Penn Warren, and—something of a special case—Kenneth Burke.

None of these men referred to himself as a "new critic"; nor did they really think of themselves as forming a movement. What united them—insofar as such disparate critics can be said to have been united—was a concern with the integrity of the literary object as such. The New Critics, as Allen Tate put it, were against "using social theories to prove something about poetry, . . . trying to make an art respectable by showing that after all it is something else." Just this won them the undying hostility of the academic establishment. The temptation to use literature for extra-literary ends is apparently perennial. Today, literature is most often enlisted in the project of multicultural politics; in the 1940s it was subordinated to the concerns of biography and literary history. The New Criticism arose as an attempt to preserve the specific gravity of literature. It was and is an effort to salvage literature from the claims of propaganda, no matter from what quarter those claims may issue.

"Close reading" is sometimes held to be the differentiating mark of the New Criticism, but this is in fact something of a red herring. Is not all attentive reading— especially attentive reading of a demanding text—"close reading"? Besides, as has often been pointed out, the French tradition of *explication de texte* is also an exercise in close reading, yet no one has thought to describe it as a version of the New Criticism. More central is an emphasis on the structure of the literary object. In an encyclopedia article written in the early 1960s, Brooks sketched some of the chief features of the phenomenon. Critics associated with the New Criticism, he noted, championed "a specifically *literary* criticism as distinguished from a study of sources or of social backgrounds or of the history of ideas or of the political and social effects of literature." The New Criticism, he continued,

> has tended to explore the structure of the work rather than the mind and personality of the artist or the reactions of his various readers. No one is forgetting (though the critics in question have frequently been accused of forgetting) that literary works are written by human beings, and may exert all sorts of effects upon the human beings who read them. But the "new critics" have characteristically attempted to deal with the literary object itself rather than with its origins and effects.

The intellectual and aesthetic sources of the New Criticism are complex and various. Perhaps the single largest influence was the early criticism of T. S. Eliot, especially his vision of literary history as forming an ideal order in which any "individual talent" assumes his significance only in relation to the whole edifice of the literary past. "No poet, no artist of any art," Eliot wrote in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), "has his complete meaning alone. . . . You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead." As Eliot pointed out, a corollary of this view is that the tradition itself is constantly formed and reformed by continuing the inclusion of new works. "The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered."

Among much else, this revolutionary view of literary history implies that the basic function of criticism is evaluation: "The rudiment of criticism," Eliot wrote in a later essay, "is the ability to select a good poem and reject a bad poem; and its most severe test is of its ability to select a good *new* poem." This is also the source of Eliot's much-abused theory of impersonality. In the infamous phrase from "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "The progress of an artist is . . . a continual extinction of personality." This is so not because Eliot

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denies the claims of personality or emotion ("only those who have personality and emotions," he notes, "know what it means to want to escape from these things"), but because what matters for criticism are not the accidents that produced a work but the work itself.

The principles articulated here by Eliot form the bedrock of New Critical practice and are everywhere implicit in Brooks's own criticism. In one sense, his new book is simply a straightforward scholarly study of some dozen poems by a handful of relatively minor seventeenth-century writers. Except for Andrew Marvell, to whom Brooks devotes two chapters, the figures dealt with in *Historical Evidence and the Reading of Seventeenth-Century Poetry* are not much known to the general reader. Henry King, Richard Corbett, James Shirley, Sir Richard Fanshawe, Sir Richard Lovelace, Aurelian Townshend, Edward Herbert (brother of George): these are names from an anthology, not towering literary presences.

Perhaps the first thing one notices about the book are its good manners. To begin with, it is written in a language that is recognizably English. Unlike so many contemporary critics—and indeed unlike so many of his younger colleagues at Yale—Brooks does not indulge in preening rhetorical excess or hermetic word games. His prose is subtle but never less than limpid. Then, too, Brooks does not make a great show of his erudition. There can be no doubt that he is immensely learned. Every page testifies to a deep knowledge of European literature from Homer down to the present day; apposite illustrations from Horace or Catullus or *The Greek Anthology* or Shakespeare or Donne or Hardy are always ready to hand to illuminate the poems he discusses; a wealth of textual scholarship is quietly deployed to explain difficult lines. But there are no barbaric neologisms or pseudo-philosophical "theories" or cryptic allusions festooning his pages. As always with Brooks, the poet's work, not the critic's ego, remains at the center of attention.

But in its effort to illustrate "the relations of historical background and critical assessment," *Historical Evidence and the Reading of Seventeenth-Century Poetry* is not simply an exercise in practical criticism. Although it consistently displays the quiet patience of the trained scholar, it has an underlying polemical purpose: to refute the charge that the New Criticism, in its concern with literary structure and poetic form, is blind to history. Some version of this charge has been leveled at the New Criticism since its inception. Early on, in the 1930s and 1940s, it amounted largely to a complaint that those referred to as New Critics did not devote sufficient attention to biographical matters. In recent years, the ante has been raised and this alleged negligence of history has been elevated into a "denial of history" (Frank Lentricchia), a "repression of history" (Terry Eagleton), and so on, with all of the superfluous political and psychological baggage that the words "denial" and "repression" can have for those susceptible to such speculations.

In fact, though, it is difficult to think of a group of critics against whom the charge of historical amnesia is more unfounded. As the enemies of the New Criticism never tire of pointing out, most members of the group are Southerners. It is worth noting the element of innuendo that typically accompanies this identification. Professor Eagleton's invocation of a "hybrid of critical technocracy and Southern religious-aesthetic conservatism" begins to suggest the extent to which the adjective "Southern" is meant as a slur: "religious," "conservative"—yes, and possibly reactionary and racist as well. Notwithstanding such epithets, the truth is that these critics, like many Southerners, are positively saturated in history, often in a very personal way. Allen Tate, for example, wrote biographies of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis, and Robert Penn Warren wrote extensively about the Civil War. Nor have other New Critics neglected historical studies. In the epilogue to *Historical Evidence*, Brooks notes that at the same time he was working on *The Well*

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Wrought Urn he was also finishing a book on the correspondence of Thomas Percy and Richard Farmer, two eighteenth-century English antiquarians. This was literary historical scholarship pure and simple.

Nor is it the case the New Criticism is blind to the uses that can be made of historical information in critical practice. In one sense, as Brooks notes in his epilogue, the argument that the New Criticism excludes history is off the mark simply because it is impossible ever to exclude extrinsic evidence completely. "If you do no more than name the author or date his poem," he notes, "you have begun to furnish extrinsic evidence." But Brooks goes further. "Sometimes," he writes, "the biographer, the literary historian, and the lexicographer hold the keys necessary for unlocking a poem's full meaning, especially if a poem dates from an earlier time." *Historical Evidence* is full of examples of this. Thus in his introduction Brooks cites a passage from Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* in which the poet tells us that "*Arthur* wore in Hall / Round-table like a farthingal." For years, this line remained inexplicable: King Arthur dressed in a spreading petticoat? One day Brooks happened on a woodcut from the 1630s, taken from a popular book about King Arthur, that depicts the king's head and upper body protruding from a hole in the center of a round table. His knights were assembled around the cloth covered table like so many decorations on a skirt: round table like a farthingale, indeed! Here was a sterling example of historical evidence illuminating a literary text.

Nevertheless, although *Historical Evidence* was written in order to demonstrate the part that certain kinds of extra-literary information can play as adjuncts to criticism, Brooks rightly insists that "one can know all *about* an author and the circumstances under which his poem was written and still not grasp the meaning of the poem." While he again and again allows that biographical and historical details can be of interest and may often help illuminate a work, he also insists that "biographical and historical facts as such are not to be confused with literary criticism." "The proper study of the poem," he writes, "is the study of the poem."

This assertion may be taken as the motto of the New Criticism. It is something that Brooks and his colleagues have repeatedly stressed. In the "Letter to the Teacher" which prefaced *Understanding Poetry* (1938), Brooks and Robert Penn Warren noted that "this book has been conceived on the assumption that if poetry is worth teaching at all it is worth teaching as poetry." The point of this simple assertion is not to deny that literature can mean a great deal to us or that it can move us profoundly. On the contrary, it is to help insure that what we are moved by in our experience of literature is not a projection of ourselves but the sensibility of the author as crystallized in the work. In this sense, the New Criticism may be seen as a prophylactic against didactic moralizing and other forms of literary narcissism. "Moralists as diverse as the Marxists and the later nationalistic Van Wyck Brooks are all for making the Muse a rewrite girl," Brooks notes in his chapter on Lovelace. "But the Muse is willful and stubborn: a thesis presented eloquently and persuasively is not necessarily the same thing as a poem."

This goes for the intentions of the author, as well. "What finally counts," Brooks writes in the epilogue to *Historical Evidence*, "are the achieved intentions, not prospective intentions or intentions as later recollected, perhaps as recorded in a letter or diary or remembered by a friend as having been told him by the poet. The shaping impulses are indeed important, but *as manifest in the work*." Thus it is that "evidence of the author's intentions as gathered from an examination of the work itself is clearly *intrinsic* evidence, and has priority over every other kind of evidence of the author's plans."

Just as the New Criticism is often accused of slighting history and ignoring the intentions of the author, so too is it routinely castigated for its alleged formalism. The idea is that in its concern with literary form and

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structure it ignores the "content" of the literary work. But this charge rests on a deep misunderstanding of the New Criticism and, in the end, of literature itself. If a "content" could be successfully abstracted from the totality that is the poem (or any other work of art), then the poem is not a poem but a tract. This is why Brooks speaks of "the heresy of paraphrase": what can be paraphrased is not art but some species of propaganda. Indeed, the whole idea that the New Criticism is "formalist" is something of a misnomer. What it teaches is not formalism but the indissolubility of form and content. The end of criticism is thus not to isolate "form" *or* content but to reveal the absolute interpenetration of the two. As Brooks explains in *The Well Wrought Urn*,

> The structure meant is a structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings. . . . [T]he principle is not one which involves the arrangements of the various elements into homogenous groupings, pairing like with like. It unites the like with the unlike. . . . [I]t represents not a residue but an achieved harmony.

It is in this sense that "The essential pattern of a poem . . . resembles that of architecture or a painting: it is a pattern of resolved stresses."

Related to all these charges is the contention that the New Criticism places too great an emphasis on the autonomy of the literary object. But this charge, too, is wide of the mark. In an article published in the Winter 1983-84 issue of *The American Scholar*, Brooks noted that he does not use the term *autonomy* "in any absolute sense. No one," he writes "would deny that every literary work is the product of language, of history, and of a particular culture. Yet great literary works do seem to transcend the particular culture out of which they came and continue to speak to mankind at large." Elsewhere, Brooks added that "No theory of poetry can make poetry autonomous in the sense that it denies that every poem is rooted in language and in the language of a particular time. We *start* outside the poem."

In many respects, this brings us to the essence of the New Criticism and its battle with the contemporary spirit. The New Criticism begins with the conviction that there *is* such a thing as intrinsic merit, and that the critic's job is to take its measure. Behind this conviction stands a belief that aesthetic experience is an integral, liberating, and irreducible component of human experience. It is in this sense that the New Criticism is not so much a particular school of criticism as the pattern of literary criticism itself. What, after all, is criticism? Is it not, as Brooks put it, "to read the work with due attention; to consider the meanings of the words themselves; to treat the figurative language as also meaningful, not merely as idle embellishment; to note the tone established or modulated and shifted; and to consider that even the rhythms may support the total effect"? This is the "program" of the New Criticism. The alternative is not some other species of literary criticism but an absence of literary criticism altogether.

Enemies of the New Criticism like to pretend that its practitioners advocate transforming literature into a bloodless abstraction suitable only for elite consumption. In fact, they have done more than any other group to make the riches of literature available to the ordinary reader. In his new book, Cleanth Brooks emerges once again as an eloquent defender of literature against the claims of mystification and ideology. Attempting to account for the exquisite modulations of Marvell's poetry, Brooks speaks of "an ultimate seriousness tempered by a graceful urbanity." It would be difficult to find a better epithet to characterize the achievements of this wise and profoundly humane critic. Perhaps we can borrow from Eliot and speak of the perfect critic.

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The mark of the She-Bear

by Kathleen Paradiso

So many paths, so many turnings seen,
That which of them to take, in diverse doubt
they been.
—Spenser

Giorgione touched the canvas as if it were a lute. Titian loved every inch of it; Goya couldn't leave. Rubens enjoyed it, as he enjoyed everything. Dürer was in control; Breughel needed his own space; Rembrandt loved its soul. Hals laughed over it, as did Judith Leister. Chardin went wooing with a rabbit's carcass. Velázquez reflected on it. Ingres petted it; Delacroix wrestled with it; Turner consumed it. Manet began to strip it down. Renoir had boundless affection for the canvas; Cassatt took it in her arms. There were times when Degas wanted to elope with it in a gondola. Van Gogh was obsessed by it. The Pre-Raphaelites loved and lost it. Sargent wowed it with his silky brush. Monet snowed it. Cézanne began to cube it; Matisse ravished it with color; Leonardo took twenty years; Picasso penetrated, and was usually done with it. The Impressionists brought ideas from Chinese and Japanese prints to it. The moderns stole the highly condensed forms of African sculpture for it. The Surrealists tried to dream about it. Frankenthaler bathes and anoints it. Names to conjure with are missing here, but the list goes on and on. Not all their work has equal power, but all was done with care, no matter what it looked like. And these painters have given us some of the most profound images of people we have, from Mona to Pereja to Gertrude Stein, but such fascination is no longer politically correct. For some time, the canvas has been a target. It's been sprayed. It's been stated on. There have been stabbings, abuse, neglect, cavalier disregard. But like all scorned lovers it will doubtless avenge itself, for it is the best loved and most feelingly painted works that last. And it is the love and feelings, including felt thought, that go into a work that finally emanate from it, more mysterious and elusive than even Big Ideas. Call this wordless poetry, the mark of the She-Bear licking her cub into shape, or call it that newly censored word, quality. Don't be too tough to call it love.

Lamenting the decline of painting, its fizzling forms, Kenneth Clark once noted that much of the "sheer energy," the "immense intellectual energy" that went into "every molding of a Renaissance palace" is now deflected into science, but that we have only to observe "the relation of an [airplane] wing to the fuselage" to see that "form is alive." One glance at the jet fighters rolling across the Saudi desert on CNN proves his point. Without a doubt, Leonardo would have been a rocket scientist today, and it's questionable whether he would have found time for anything else. Similarly, lovers of truth and beauty are migrating to cinematography and film directing, and one of the most indelible scenes on film pays homage to painting. But, not surprisingly, at the end of *Death in Venice*, Visconti changes one of

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the final images in the story—the black cloth over the camera at the water's edge once snapping in the "freshening" wind, Zephyr, now hangs motionless.[1] Rubens might well have been a successful movie producer, Delacroix, a blockbuster hit, though Turner could have done nothing but paint. And what might Akira Kurosawa *not* have done in oils?

Given this exodus, it's a wonder anyone still paints at all. Today's ruling aesthetic, irreverence—most often lamely conceived (no noses left to tweak), driven to near psychopathic lengths by "anxiety of influence," and intolerant of any other—is part of the problem. Irreverence once seemed like fresh air, but decades of deflation have created a tremendous vacuum that has turned the art world inside out. It's no news that the very idea of quality has been called elitist, sexist, racist, and, no doubt, crimes have been perpetrated in its name, intentionally or through muddled thinking. But it's also an idea that allowed an artist such as Goya to transcend his circumstances, while even Rembrandt's pupils deserted him in his later years because they couldn't see it. Most critics are reluctant to say what they mean by quality, though silence is most exclusionary of all. Talking about it openly is one way to stop lying about it. Painting itself doesn't lie. Everyone knows it can have startling immediacy, like the voice of a poet you never met before suddenly next to you. It's fundamentally egalitarian, and doesn't require a billion-dollar budget, logistics chain, or cast of thousands. Akin to poetry, which requires nothing but memory, painting needs only the wall of a cave and a piece of charcoal. That's why, like a poet's words, a painter's hand will always have the power to touch us—if it's not tied up.

But even as I write, Conceptualists, Post-Object artists, and other theorists are thinking of ways to send artists bound and blindfolded into the twenty-first century, to turn off the lights in a new dark age ruled by the left cranial lobe. And this makes even the most dogmatic politics look good. In the past, painters disguised politics in the velvet and gabardine of art—Goya didn't lie about Charles IV, any more than Manet lied about M. Duret, glove in hand (can Cindy Sherman honestly have missed this?). More recently, painters have felt constrained to disguise art as politics, whether from guilt, opportunism, a sense of social responsibility, or simply to express, as artists have always expressed, their experience. But not every artist's experience translates into politics, correct or incorrect, which leaves many in a quandary. There is still room, of course, in the "outsider art" market niche, or for those doing left-brain work, or something flaky, like bubble-gum sculpture—but God help anyone painting today, not posing as a naïf, who remembers Raphael but hasn't heard of Lacan. "Bag by Kristeva," "boots by Lacan," "leather jacket by Foucault" was how *Mirabella* described one artist's "theoretical identity." What theorists in this and similar get-ups have in mind is far worse than politics. It's a slaying of the right brain by the left, interminable march on the road to something ineffably "new," and butchery of painting's wordless poetry. It will all but kill any artists left who draw, if they're not dead already. And if such theorists take the field, there will be no going back, as artists *working in oils* have always gone back, including the strongest and most original, to Italy.

There's no road from Turner to Monet (at MOMA) to Krasner and Pollock, only widening possibilities. Progress in painting as in poetry has a thousand starting points and myriad intersecting paths, some deceptive, and only Bears know how to find the honey. Sir Philip Sydney found it in art, and wrote that nature delivers a "brazen" world, "poets deliver a golden," issuing in the golden age of Elizabethan poetry. Shakespeare found it in nature, "under the blossom that hangs on the bough." (The *Winter's Tale* Bear that chases Antigonus offstage is on the wrong track.) Spenser found

1 In the movie, the wind picks up only when Gustave's spirit leaves his body. If he had understood Titian, he would have lived. The cameras, in any case, keep rolling.

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it on the quest for Holiness, and even his most worldly-wise rhetoric is curiously bedewed, ruddy as Venetian painting. Such sweets are off-limits in the art world today. But sweetness, of an earlier time and latitude than the sweetness of the Elizabethans, was not the least of Titian's gifts, which continue to elude definition but can be seen by anyone.

The mark of the She-Bear shows in both the mind and body of a painting, which together might once have been called, without hesitation, its soul, and viewers aren't left to project it onto the canvas by themselves. The mind of a painting can be read, analyzed, and evaluated like the ideas and organization of any work, but the body and soul can be experienced only through qualities unique to painting. Titian was one of the first painters to have the wisdom to let painting do what it does best; the Abstract Expressionists were among the last. The smooth, sprayed, unidimensional surfaces of many recent paintings have the look of photos or posters. They have not necessary or sufficient cause to be paintings, just as a Rembrandt, with the light reflecting from the many layers of body paint and glazes as from the depths of a pool, could be nothing else.

Thought has always been *visible* in painting. It shows in the choice (partly instinctive) of subject matter (if any), insight into subject, composition, materials, technique, invention, use of symbols, allegories, narratives, kinds and levels of discourse, relation to past and present, critical acumen, complexity, simplicity, truth, vision, and more, to the extent these can be separated from the body of a painting, if at all. Style, especially when consciously chosen—some styles are as natural as handwriting—also shows thought, though it's well known the most deeply felt work transcends style. Matisse was very conscious of style when he scraped down and reworked his canvases so they would look easy, just as Picasso reworked his so they would *not* look easy. Sargent had so much fun with his natural facility, his born style, he never dreamed it could be a problem, and was convicted of never losing a commission. Today, many artists seem to think affecting an utter lack of facility and complete absence of style is a ticket to transcendence.

Thought in painting is an open book. We know that language transcends itself when words cohere not only to mean, but to create a feeling or experience. In the same way, the minutiae of a painting, every brushstroke, scumble, and smudge, can cohere to form a wordless poem. This is what Horace meant by "ut pictura poesis," not what Clement Greenberg said when he disparaged the literary in painting. The literary or poetical in painting is the selection, repetition, and variation of lines, forms, colors, tones, themes, and motifs to convey perceptions, and is the opposite of random, meaningless, or merely didactic language, which fast becomes tedious, because it's tuneless. Children understand that poems help us to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell ideas, or sense, in some curious way, the measures of the mind. Poems have little or nothing to do with the carelessly abstract, flat-footed, often convoluted, and befuddling language of many philosophers, which seems to attract art theorists today, bursting with "-ion," "-ate," and "-ism" words. What Greenberg actually wrote against was the use of prosaic or merely illustrative imagery for prose readability, as in Surrealism—read my dream. The syntax, of course, was Freud's. (Renoir must have dreamt *Moulin de la Galette*, but the syntax was his own.)

From wine-dark seas to ordinary evenings, the forms vary, but poetic language has an emotional gravity that is in essence Romantic, and the same can be said of the best oil painting. The pigments of oils are not the colorless Kantian tulips about which Jacques Derrida discourses in *The Truth in Painting* (in which Derrida gives the lie in theory), but a bank of violets from the Forest of Arden, or Wandring Wood. Kant's tulip, transparent, elegant, Classical, might well be a metaphor for a certain kind of sculpture or architecture, but Titian? And the

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mark of beauty in painting Derrida calls the "sans of the pure cut," and, then again, the "non-sans of the pure cut," is closer to the certainty of a feeling. Stones, words, lies, licentious metaphors, partial truths, and some tulips, all can look, or appear to the imagination as, pure or clear cut. But this "sans" or "non-sans" is the first sketch, Picasso before he tried to make it look hard, Goya before he got up in the morning. Even Botticelli was more interested in the smell of an idea.

Two readings of Botticelli's *Primavera*—the chapter in Edgar Wind's *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1968) and what a young dancer with the New York City Ballet noticed in the Uffizi—show how philosophical, literary, and poetical inspirations work in painting and qualitative differences between them.[2] The readings themselves have qualitative differences: Wind interprets; the dancer translates. Wind draws on many texts—Ovid, to confirm the idea of the transformation of Chloris into Flora that people can still see today; Horace and Seneca, whose ideas of love the Graces dance, "so far as dialectic can be danced"; Pico on Venus; Ficino and Virgil on Mercury. Wind finds in Mercury's repose, stirring the clouds with his staff, "a very particular philosophical idea"—Neo-Platonism. As you might have guessed, then, without ever having seen the painting, Mercury is pointing to the "hidden light of intellectual beauty." What can be seen, but may not be immediately apparent to every viewer, is Wind's revelation, via Ficino, of the architecture of the painting, the way it comes full circle from the Beyond to Zephyr's entry or re-entry. And what is most astonishing is that Wind himself refers to these allegories as "philosophical pedantry," going on to say "the sentiment in the picture extinguishes the thought." And he's right in both cases, though we could use more of such "pedantry," and "sentiment" is the wrong word. The first must have had Greenberg cheering: a lesser artist could have constructed these allegories, Bunyan as opposed to Spenser (maybe not quite). What was the man John Ruskin saw as arguably the greatest linear draftsman of all time doing?

The dancer saw immediately the *poetical* quality of Botticelli's thought. She noticed how mercurial the wind that played through the veils was, in little puffs, the pun, the reigning metaphor. If Mercury doesn't leave the clouds alone there may be a sudden shower, as so frequently happens early in the spring, not a New York spring, but a more gradual Florentine spring, and when it rains, the fragrance of the flowers underfoot will fill the air. And that fine Florentine smile . . . is she laughing at us? will she disappear? —mercurially, etc. Neo-Platonism enhances our reading, and, doubtless, Pico and Ficino saw the Beyond the way we see the weather, but when the textual sources are no longer accessible, viewers will still respond to the wordless poetry.

Few minds have so light but sure a touch. A more heavy-handed use of the reigning metaphor, closer to the politics of everyday speech without deteriorating altogether into prose, is evident in both the thought and body of Constable's impending storms. Fuseli put it this way: "I'm going to see Constable; bring me mine umbrella."

The mind's eye moves over every shadow and shape in the work of Titian's teacher, Giorgione, and where Botticelli's line is fluty, Giorgione's transitions aspire to lute notes. His thought can be seen in the raised hand of the lutanist in *Concert Champêtre*, gesturing as in talk, or simply pausing, the lute notes dilating over his fellow picnickers in the soft air through the softly rounded trees. Titian was fortunate to have such a simple-minded teacher, as opposed to Hegel or Zola, though even the most banal prose can't wreck a born painter.

Titian's conceptions were at once poetical, and more, the ideas inspiriting and informing *Sacred and Profane Love* (Galleria Borghese, Rome), metaphors, and more.

2 The dancer was Barbara Fisher, the author, most recently, of *Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous.*

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More was the motto on Titian's impressa—"Natura Potentior Ars," or "art is more powerful than nature"—along with the image of the She-Bear licking its cub into shape, from Pliny. He showed there is more than meets the eye to love and painting, and, unlike Conceptualists at work today, who make ideas unintelligible, he came as close as any painter ever has to incarnating thought. Scholars tell us Titian conceived the painting on the occasion of the marriage of Laura Bagarotto to Nicolo Aurelio in 1514, and it has been called by many names. In it, Titian illuminates the beliefs and values of his time and ideas on art for the newly wedded couple and artists coming after him. Ideas on bestial as opposed to terrestrial and extraterrestrial love, procreation, creation and Creation, outer versus inner beauty and gifts, nature versus nurture, including the nurture of artists, and Florentine versus Venetian painting, all can be seen by anyone. Art historians, however, seem blind to the flowers on the rim of the fountain, and to Titian's ideas on nurture and painting, or they don't think them significant, or palatable to modern viewers in the painting I shall henceforth call, for lack of a better name, *Love*.

Titian used fashion for the prelapsarian and fallen states from the Bible, much as Milton and Blake did later. Scholars have explained that the richly dressed woman on the right with the castle in the background is Profane, or, as Wind prefers to think of her, Earthly Love. Her gloved hand points to a delicate Botticellian rose on the fountain's rim near the center of the painting. The nude to the left, derived from a Nereid on a Roman sarcophagus [3] and from *Concert Champêtre*, is Sacred or, as Wind prefers, Celestial Love. She is watching over—minding—a putto playing in the water and lights its way with a flaming lamp scholars call Truth. Between Earthly and Celestial Love, the putto dips his or her hand into a fountain of love, baptismal font, well of inspiration, Roman sarcophagus, or canal,[4] possibly derived from the Muse's pitcher in *Concert Champêtre*, said to contain waters of inspiration, from Genesis, and from Venice itself. Titian's "canal" is teeming with life, underscored by an awareness of mortality. Death doesn't end in the sarcophagus but is enfolded by life, birth, renaissance, and that toward which the shadowy steeple in the distance points.

Wind identifies the infant with Amor, "the loving spirit," and "the spirit moving over the waters," and it is quite plausible, since Titian specifically locates the spirit in the hand, that this is not only an emblem of procreative love, but of the artist's hand moving over the canvas. The infant isn't blindfolded, as many Cupids are, and may notice its own reflection in the water, as Titian must often have seen himself over the side of a gondola. Maybe the infant is fishing for an oar, or paintbrush, certainly not stirring the clouds, like Mercury, nor pointing to a Neo-Platonic Ideal in the Beyond, except as mirrored within. Maybe Titian is telling us the secret of Venetian painting is to look and reach inward, and paint in a loving spirit. In *Love*, creation and procreation don't end at conception, but with nurturing. And just as he was given insights by

3 When Milton wrote "Each fetter'd Ghost slips to his several grave," in "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," he may have been alluding to this "sarcophagus," as doubtless many scholars have noted in the voluminous Milton archives. In *Love*, Titian is transforming Classical imagery and lore even as he draws from it, in the same river as Milton, though painting before the Reformation and closer to *Pagan Mysteries*.

4 See Erwin Panofsky's *Problems in Titian* (New York University Press, 1969), pages 116 and 117. Panofsky and Wind (in his chapter in *Pagan Mysteries* on *Sacred and Profane Love*) interpret the relief on the fountain depicting bestial love in relation to the marriage theme but make no mention of the fountain's odd, canal-like shape. They had their eyes on Alciati, interestingly enough, but Titian was watching the baby. He was thinking like a parent: "How many times have I told you to stay away from the canal? Look at you—you're all wet again." And he wanted to make sure the baby could swim.

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Giorgione and others before him, Titian, the She-Bear, embodied in Love's two aspects, invented this Venetian allegory for all who see his mark.

There's no fundamental difference between figurative and abstract painting; the difference is between poetry and prose. Turner, the first and arguably most powerful abstract painter, repeatedly painted one Romantic poem: light, dark, storm . . . soul, which makes some people uncomfortable. There are epics, odes, ballads, University Wits, Dunces, and Gullivers in both mediums; limerick writers and limerick painters. The collisions in modern painting had already been Donne. The intense clarity of details and convergence of tonal planes in Vermeer, the camera angles and modern photographic splicing in Degas, the condensation of forms in African sculpture and Picasso, no matter how abstract—all make thought visible, give it, if you will, a local habitation and a body, and it doesn't take a parergon to see.

The body of a well-loved painting will never be mistaken for a poster. The painting is the primary text. A person can get an idea of it from reproductions and slides but only a vague idea. Maybe this has contributed to the negativity in the art world about the past. What many artists today may be rejecting are not actual works, but reproductions of them. This is a little like rejecting *Hamlet* in high school without ever having seen it performed. But, as one young filmmaker put it after seeing the Zeffirelli movie, "It's a good script." Paintings made in earlier times rarely travel as far, if they travel at all, and are sometimes dismissed without having been seen. Art institutions that once obsequiously venerated the past now obsequiously venerate "new forms," like Mindless Philosophy, Inarticulate Language, and Bubble-Gum Sculpture, which, as one has only to look under the folding seat at the movies to see, have been around for ages. And they still haven't figured out what originality is. The body like the mind of a well-loved painting comes in all shapes and it doesn't take X-rays or hermetic knowledge to see it. There can be complete transparency in drawing, Classical elements, symmetries, but, Derrida notwithstanding, the truth in painting is that the best loved works in oils, like the medium itself, are Romantically dense, because *we* are dense.

Two anecdotes about Degas tell much about the body of a painting. Jeanne Raunay recalled how Degas, meeting a woman at the theater, said, "Madam, would you be so kind as to permit me to touch the line of your nose with my forefinger, from your forehead to the tip?" and when she consented, did, oblivious of all else. Paul Valéry, too, remembered: "His hands went in search of forms. He groped his way around objects; the sense of touch increasingly predominated; he preferred to describe things in terms of how they felt to his hands; he praised a picture by declaring: 'It's flat like good painting.'" That last is too cryptic; he could not possibly have meant unidimensional; his whole life's work contradicted that. Its tactile qualities, from the undertones and tiers of color, to the open if not always subtle brushwork and crumbly textures of the pastels he liked so often to use, showed he meant it when he said that he hoped Titian would "say a few words to him" as he stepped into his gondola.

He had line, too, not always the one, the only, the inevitable line, but line. The body of a line is more difficult to describe than to paint, and sometimes all but bodiless, as in Botticelli. Line moves. It is a little like the right word or words and has life and very little to do with information. The quick, light, flickering line of Corot's birches in the Frick will never be boring. Line is almost impossible to separate from the idea of a painting, like flute notes. Picasso had it when he wanted and wasn't playing tricks. Not surprisingly, artists have copied his irascible inventions without being in the least irascible themselves, and lacking all pith.

Color and tone, together with line, are the painter's native language. The black, auburn, blues, and gold of Renoir's *Lady at the Piano* light up the Art Institute of

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Chicago. The violets, greens, and grays of Cézanne's rocks and trees in MOMA, to say nothing of his Bay of Marseilles, speak to people who don't understand Cubism, and to those who do. Rothko gave one big thought to his composition, and let colors do the rest. The chastened hues of the large Manet portraits in Chicago are embedded in class politics and look a bit sunk in. Manet was absolutely necessary to painting after Neo-Classicism, and we owe him a debt. He was a Bear. But politics didn't serve Manet as well as Manet served politics. The Rembrandts look fresher. The self-portrait in the Frick has a duller luster than many, and, as the viewer looks up into Rembrandt's eyes, the shadow across the forehead falls in such a way that the viewer gets the sense, almost, of looking into the painter's mind—one of nine children, son of a miller from Leyden, yet every one. This is who politics are meant to serve. In stark contrast, MOMA's recent "High & Low" show (except for the Picasso-Braque section) was a drab sight, sorry thought, and history, the way Rembrandt will never be just history.

The dark luster I remember from the Prado was somehow missing from the last Goya show at the Met though I can't quite tell why. The "blacker black" Goya labored for seemed darker in the dry Madrid air, where it's clear from the satin brushwork of Maria Luisa's gown, painted before Goya went deaf, he liked piano, as over the softly rounded, almost misshapen, fingered forms and Spanish depths he played dazzling impromptus. The Black Paintings embody, at least in part, one man's deaf world, the clear brushwork sinking away, along with the full range of tones into monochrome, darkness, and madness. It's no news; the Duchess of Alba pointed it out in 1707, and if his politics are finally correct, no poster can ever reveal why he remains "solo Goya."

The Titian in the Art Institute is from his workshop; a person could conceivably shrug off the ones in New York, but the Titians in the Prado are more. John Ruskin, often unreliable but the first to recognize Turner, tells why. "Nature is always mysterious and secret in her means; and art is always likest her when most inexplicable. That execution which is least comprehensible and which therefore defies imitation (other qualities being supposed alike) is the best." That's why scholars can only describe, not explain, the sheer physical qualities of Titian's art—the texture of the canvas showing through, marks of brushes "big as birch brooms," finger smudges, feather-light touches, tonal grounds, and colors that go "around, over, and through" each other, to borrow a phrase from General Schwarzkopf. Only Bears can swim in those canals. Michelangelo liked Titian's *colorito* but thought his *disegno* could be improved by more practice drawing from life. Vasari wrote that his pictures were often "repainted, gone over, and retouched repeatedly." One of his students, Palma Giovine, remembered "he painted more with his fingers than with the brush" as he finished a painting. (He was painting before the piano, and had never heard Mozart.) And scholars say he often procrastinated and completed one painting only after threats from the government. His paintings were not random objects about which critics could say anything, but spoke eloquently for themselves.

Those who learned from Titian became Giant Cubs—Rubens, and through him Velázquez, Goya, Degas, and others, but there were runts too. And even in the days when Bears roamed all over the art world, some could be dangerous to track. Picasso was a He-She-Bear and sometimes let the Cubs eat junk food and went prowling and stole from the African Magic Bear sculptors, but he didn't mean any harm because he thought everything belonged to him, the way all art belongs to all Bears, as long as it's true art, because Bears are not hermetic.

The ideal environment for Bears would not necessarily set painting back five hundred years, but everyone would recognize the Bear essentials. The art world would be even more permissive than today's—people would be allowed to talk openly about that now unspeakable word, quality. Politicians

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would see Bears come in every human kind but not just anyone can or should even want to be a Bear. There are other jobs, worthy causes, partisan politics, wildlife preservation, philosophy itself. Artists in such an environment would not be forced to do their best. No one would ask them to leap as many times as dancers at rehearsals, practice as much as musicians, imagine scenes as fully as actors and actresses, revise as often as poets, or plan as carefully as some film directors—that would be asking too much. Theory and politics wouldn't tie their hands. They would be true to their best instincts, and not kid themselves, kill themselves, or exploit anyone. The witty ones would not be forced to be serious all the time, just once in a while. The minds and bodies of painting would be together again. Everyone would discover a happier relation to the past than marksman to target. Such an environment wouldn't guarantee quality in painting, but it wouldn't rule it out either. It would allow the possibility. Beyond that, painting would be up to artists, because no one has ever figured out how they do it, though some grope their way on all fours, some run like Cubs, and one was a She-Bear.

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Brian Friel: transcending the Irish national pastime

by Richard Tillinghast

HUGH: Indeed, Lieutenant. A rich language. A rich literature. You'll find, sir, that certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives. I suppose you could call us a spiritual people.

OWEN: (*Not unkindly; more out of embarrassment before the Lieutenant*) Will you stop that nonsense, Father?

HUGH: Nonsense? What nonsense? . . . Yes, it is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception—a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to . . . inevitabilities. (*To* OWEN) Can you give me the loan of half-a-crown?

"How these people blather on!", the London *Sunday Times*'s drama critic, John Peter, wrote recently about a new production of Sean O'Casey's *Plough and the Stars.* Irish playwrights have, over the years, confirmed the nation's reputation for talk by mounting plays which live or die by their characters' ability to keep an audience enthralled by language. From *The School for Scandal* by Sheridan (one forgets he was Irish) to *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Wilde, to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, we remember the great Irish plays for their dialogue rather than for the inventiveness of their dramatic structure. One tends to think of Beckett as an international phenomenon rather than as an Irishman; but how quintessentially Irish he was to put his characters in trashcans or bury them up to their necks in sand so that, their movements severely restricted, they were free to spellbind with their talk! After eight hundred years of invasion, military occupation, economic plundering, and systematic attempts to eradicate their native religion and culture, what has been left to the Irish other than talk? Talk is the national pastime.

Among the myriad ironies of Irish history is that even after the colonizing British had virtually stamped out the Gaelic language, the Irish went to work on English itself and transformed it into the colorful hybrid that is spoken on the island today. This variety of English, though it largely uses standard vocabulary, has taken on the rhythms, syntax, intonations, and often even the grammar of Irish, which, though almost extinct, has managed while dying to inseminate another linguistic organism with its inventiveness, its evasions and qualifications, its elaborate and ambiguous courtesies.

Brian Friel, the foremost living Irish playwright, author of over twenty plays and a prolific short-story writer, has consistently created characters who have defined themselves through talk. While his focus on language places him firmly within Irish theatrical tradition, his insistence that language is a tool of oppression both from above and from within has put the politics of language at the center of his concerns. This emphasis

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is unprecedented on the Irish stage. Seamus Deane, in his book *Celtic Revivals* (1985), has made the point that Friel, who was born in Northern Ireland in 1929 and grew up in Derry, a Northern city plagued by chronic unemployment and sectarian tensions between the Protestant descendants of British colonists and the native Catholic Irish, grew up in a world where failure and frustration were a constant, and politics was a given. Friel, unlike writers from more comfortable backgrounds who "discover" politics and see it as a solution, regards politics as part of the problem, as basic as bad weather.

Despite modernization and the growth of a new spirit of optimism in Ireland following the economic boom of the Sixties and the country's entry into the European Community, the stereotype—amounting almost to a cultural icon—of the brilliant failure, the great talker who accomplishes nothing, still persists. No other Irish writer has been as forthright as Friel in identifying talk, not as a way to charm, but as a temperamental response to, and compensation for, failure —itself seen as resulting from centuries of defeat and suppression.

While Friel and the other writers who founded the Field Day Theatre Company in 1980, partially as a way of addressing the political crisis in the north, have made a point of writing especially for an Irish audience, his plays make clear to the non-Irish playgoer that oceans of sentimentality and prejudice keep us from seeing the Irish in their true complexity. The sentimentality is likely to be initiated by Irish-Americans who from a position of relative prosperity are free to romanticize The Ould Sod. The prejudice is more likely to come from the British who still, after all these hundreds of years, seem unable to admit how they crushed the Irish nation.

Beyond his political analysis of the national passion for talk, to which I shall return, Friel stands out among Irish playwrights by his deft touch with theatrical devices and dramatic structure. At a performance of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), the audience may not at first realize—unless they have read the play, or unless they are serious types who arrive at the theater early and study the program before the house lights go down—that the two young men they see talking onstage are, as Friel's notes put it, "two views of the same man." What the audience apprehends are two characters unnervingly familiar with each other's thoughts and lives—or rather with that single life they constitute as private and public aspects of the same character. Considerable time passes before we notice that Gar (Private) is invisible to the other characters and that, in the words of the stage notes, Gar (Public) "never sees him and *never looks at him*. One cannot look at one's *alter ego*."

Friel's employment of this and similar devices is both bold and simple. The confidence of his dramatic imagination is apparent in *Dancing at Lughnasa*—pronounced "*Loo*-nu-suh"—(1990), a triumph in its Abbey Theatre premiere and winner of the Olivier Theatre Award for Best Play of 1990 in London. (Readers of this piece may see the Abbey production at the Plymouth Theater in Manhattan; it begins its run on October 24.) As the play opens, Michael stands downstage, reminiscing to the audience about his childhood, to one side of the set's rendering of an Irish country kitchen, where the family spends much of its time. The kitchen in the Abbey production was realistic but set at an angle to the audience, with its front and side walls removed so that the space outside the house was not blocked from the vision of either actors or audience. Gerard McSorley, who played Michael at the Abbey, wore a good but rumpled suit and the dark shirt and solid-colored tie of someone in the arts, journalism, advertising, etc. It was clear both from his dress and his accent that he had come some distance from his upbringing in Donegal, the remotest and "wildest" Irish county. As the action of the play begins, the child Michael is meant to be sitting on the ground outside the cottage, making kites, and his mother and aunts address him and respond to him, though the

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child is invisible and his remarks are assumed rather than heard.

More radical and more difficult, since the illusion must be carried off not visually but by dialogue alone, is the pretense that most of the characters in *Translations* (1981)—though of course the play is in English—speak Irish, which is their only language other than a smattering of Greek and Latin they learn from their "hedge" schoolmaster. Dialogue like the following is a bit disorienting:

MAIRE: *Sum fatigatissima.*
JIMMY: *Bene! Optime!*
MAIRE: That's the height of my Latin. Fit me better if I had even that much English.
JIMMY: English? I thought you had some English?
MAIRE: Three words . . .

In *Living Quarters* (1978), using the nonnaturalistic character Sir as an omniscient guide who stage-manages the Butler family through their shared catastrophe, Friel deconstructs plot as a device for revealing the truth. Such ploys, sometimes outlandish but very clear-cut once the audience has accepted the illusion, give Friel's plays a satisfying crispness on the stage, a reassuring sense that what we are witnessing is guided by a sure hand.

Faith Healer (1980) deserves mention here because it represents a crucial moment in Friel's development. In the Fifties his short stories appeared frequently in *The New Yorker*, and perhaps their popularity owed something to the American taste for the occasional glass of Irish sentimentality. In *Philadelphia*, the play that established Friel's reputation on the New York stage, Gar (Private)'s palaver smoothed over, in performance at least, dark truths about the desperate conspiracy in rural Ireland to strangle any attempt to rise above the stultifying influence of the Church, the schools, and a class structure that is all the more rigid for having such a short distance between its cellar and attic. But Friel later got himself branded as what in Ireland is called a Republican—i.e., an IRA supporter and exponent of violence—and he suffered at the box office as a result.

Faith Healer may be seen as a gesture of defiance by Friel as an artist. The play has no political surround. Nor has it a conventional dramatic structure. Instead it daringly structures itself around four monologues, delivered in turn by the play's three characters. Radical in construction, it is at the same time utterly traditional, utterly Irish one might say—because it depends completely on the Irish genius for captivating an audience, whether in a pub, in someone's kitchen, or in the theater, by telling a story. The easy approach to the leading role would be to play Frank Hardy, the faith healer of the title, as a charlatan. The problem is that Frank is not really a fake. He has the gift—on certain nights. I should think the actor would find the parallels to his own art a challenge, and more. James Mason played the role in its first production, at the Longacre Theater in New York. I saw Donal McCann—whom moviegoers will remember as Gabriel in John Huston's film of Joyce's story "The Dead"—as Frank in the 1990 Abbey revival. What one could never forget about his performance was the stillness, the sense of nothingness almost, from which his rendering of the character sprang. As he stood motionless on the bare stage, risking the longest pauses I have ever heard and getting away with them, one glimpsed the abyss from which the human enterprise proceeds.

The sense that the play represented, for its author, not merely a comeback, but more than that—a definition of himself as an artist—is borne out in resemblances between the faith healer and the playwright or fictionalist. "It wasn't that he was simply a liar," his wife, Grace, says about Frank, "it was some compulsion he had to adjust, to refashion, to re-create everything around him. Even the people who came to him . . . yes, they were real enough, but not real as persons, real as fictions, his fictions, extensions of himself . . ."

The high-spirited banter of Gar (Private) in *Philadelphia* consists of asides audible

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only by stage convention: remarks Gar (Public) makes to himself. They delight the audience because they remind us of our own inner commentaries. For Gar O'Donnell himself, though, they serve a complex and ambivalent function. Interior dialogue is, first of all, a survival mechanism in this character who exists as his father's employee in the family grocery and dry-goods business in a small town in Ireland in the Fifties. On the other hand his rich inner life facilitates Gar's further isolation, because providing as it does an outlet for his humor, cynicism, idealism, ambition, and hostility, it prevents him from confronting openly his frustrations in the public arena.

While in performance the fine talker familiar from Irish life and literature has his way with the audience, who leave the theater under the spell of his charm, all that fine talk constitutes, Friel suggests, a kind of pathology—a character's means not only of surviving psychically through what Skinner in *Freedom of the City* (1974) calls "defensive flippancy" but of managing to keep any hard self-analysis from penetrating his defenses. In *Aristocrats* (1980) Casimir, a dotty fabulist, lives in a world of his own invention, wherein his ancestors rub elbows with the famous, as at the birthday party for Balzac in Vienna which he "remembers" his grandfather telling him about:

> Everybody was there: Liszt and George Sand and Turgenev and Mendelssohn and the young Wagner and Berlioz and Delacroix and Verdi—and of course Balzac. Everybody. It went on for days. God knows why Grandfather was there—probably gate-crashed.

A foil to this highly amusing blather is Tom Hoffnung, an American academic doing research on "recurring cultural, political and social modes in the upper strata of Roman Catholic society in rural Ireland since the act of Catholic Emancipation," as he puts it. To which Casimir, taken aback, replies, "Good heavens. Ha-ha." Tom, with the utmost tact, questions the veracity of Casimir's fables: "A few details, Casimir; perhaps you could help me with them?" Even when he catches Casimir out in all sorts of improbabilities and patent lies, he remains gentle and apologetic: "I make little mistakes like that all the time myself. My mother worked for the Bell Telephone Company and until I went to high school I thought she worked for a Mr. Bell who was my uncle for God's sake . . ." Casimir manages to fabulize even this, getting a huge laugh from the audience by saying a few minutes later, "I suspect he may be a very wealthy man: his uncle owns the Bell Telephone Company."

Friel characters often maintain fictions about themselves, using talk, of course, as a way of supporting these fictions. As in the classic English mystery novel of the Thirties, the action of these plays takes place within a closed community—usually adhering to the classical unities of time, place, and action. The friction of interaction between characters wears these fictions away, and the secret that lies behind the fiction is revealed. In *Translations* the action occurs in the classroom of an Irish "hedge" school of the 1830s; in *Freedom* in the Lord Mayor's parlor in the Guildhall, Derry; in *Faith Healer* on a stage that simulates the provincial hired halls where Frank Hardy failed or succeeded in working his healing magic. The three characters, Frank, Grace, and their cockney manager, Teddy, form a family of sorts.

An observer of Irish society might be tempted to identify the Church as the nation's most potent institution. But Tom, the family priest in *Living Quarters*, occupies (though not in his own view) a position only a step above Commandant Frank Butler's personal servant:

> SIR: [*reading from a ledger in which he has written out the family's story*] "'Is Uncle Tom coming with us?' they'd say. And he did. Always. Everywhere. Himself and the batman—in attendance."
>
> TOM: That's one way of—
>
> SIR: "—and that pathetic dependence on the Butler family, together with his excessive drinking

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make him a cliché, a stereotype. He knows this himself—"

The Canon, played by Derry Power in the Second Age production of *Philadelphia* I saw in Dublin last winter, got a huge laugh at his first appearance onstage, his white hair and lobster-red face triggering an immediate shock of recognition, as Gar (Private) muttered "Bugger the Canon!" Like Uncle Tom in *Living Quarters*, this priest is a harmless old parasite whom no one takes seriously. Here he is arriving for his nightly game of draughts with S. B. O'Donnell:

CANON: She says I wait till the rosary's over and the kettle's on . . . hee-hee-hee.
S. B.: She's a sharp one, Madge.
CANON: "You wait," says she, "till the rosary's over and the kettle's on!"

The schoolmaster, another brick in the wall of the Irish village, gives Gar, as a going-away present, a book of his poems ("I had them printed privately last month. Some of them are a bit mawkish but you'll not notice any distinction") before touching him up for the loan of ten shillings on his way to the pub.

But the observer I invoked in the previous paragraph would be mistaken if he gave the Church pride of place among Irish institutions. The family, that prototype of the closed community, is the prime focus of Brian Friel's analytical dissection of Irish society. Why the family is an even mightier force in Ireland than elsewhere may be explained in part by the country's history. Though there were petty kings in Ireland as far back as its history can be traced, Ireland never had the centralized government of countries like England. Loyalty always meant loyalty to a clan. When Ireland was forced into the British Empire, the family provided one of the few available defenses against the redcoats and the landlord.

I have mentioned how the three characters in *Faith Healer* form an impromptu family, and how Tom in *Living Quarters* clings pathetically to the Butler family. Likewise Madge, the housekeeper in *Philadelphia*, gives Gar the maternal love he never received from his mother, who died three days after giving birth to him. The play's central pathos, though, resides in Gar's and his father S. B.'s inability to connect. The moment that Gar remembers fondly from childhood involves a blue boat in which father and son once went fishing. When Gar finally brings himself to mention the boat, this is his father's response:

S. B.: (*Justly, reasonably*) There was a brown one belonging to the doctor, and before that there was a wee flat-bottom—but it was green—or was it white? I'll tell you, you wouldn't be thinking of a punt—it could have been blue—one that the curate had down at the pier last summer—

Once Gar has gone to bed on his last night at home before emigrating to America, his father tenderly relates to Madge some moments he recalls from Gar's childhood. But they can never say these things to each other. The bonds between parent and child are parodied in the play when Gar (Public) discusses with his friend Joe his decision to emigrate:

JOE: Lucky bloody man. I wish I was you.
PUBLIC: There's nothing stopping you, is there?
JOE: Only that the mammy planted sycamore trees last year, and she says I can't go till they're tall enough to shade the house.
PUBLIC: You're stuck for another couple of days, then.

To put broader political issues in a larger context, Friel's favorite ploy is to bring an "expert," like Tom Hoffnung in *Aristocrats*, onstage—or, in *Freedom*, Dr. Dodds, another American professor, who announces: "I'm a sociologist and my field of study is inherited poverty or the culture of poverty or more accurately the subculture of poverty." Dr. Dodd's ideas simplify the characters, but do not ultimately distort them. That the subculture of poverty provides the chronically

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poor with strategies for self-definition and survival will find little disagreement. But a balance of viewpoint is achieved by the presence and the dialogue of characters who actually come from "the subculture of poverty," and who are more likely to be talking about things like how their feet hurt, or whether the horses they bet on have won or lost. These characters—or some of them, at any rate—are not incapable of analyzing their own predicaments:

SKINNER: If I'm sick, the entire wisdom of the health authority is at my service. And should I die, the welfare people would bury me in style. It's only when I'm alive and well that I'm a problem.

Friel's cultural explorations in his latest play, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, are both broader and more dramatic than anything he has attempted before. Early in the play the casual language of the characters establishes a framework of "civilized" Christian contempt for all that is "pagan," non-European, uncontrollable. The new wireless set, which Maggie, the joker of the family, at first wants to call "Lugh, after the old Celtic God of the Harvest" (this is the narrator Michael's voice), has thrown the household into disarray here in the summer of 1936. One of the sisters calls two of the others, who have hiked up their skirts and are dancing, "A right pair of pagans, the two of you." But the "voodoo" radio is not alone in disrupting this tightly controlled household. Living a short distance from the imaginary town of Ballybeg (where most of Friel's plays are set), the Mundys are "townies" who hold themselves above the country people—particularly the back-country folk who celebrate the druidic festival of Lughnasa. "Pagan" influences, though, seep irresistibly into the Mundys' lives.

Some of the play's funniest moments are provided by Michael's Uncle Jack, a priest who has been repatriated from Africa not, as we at first are told, because of poor health but because, during his years in mythical Ryanga, he has been converted to the wisdom of the "pagan" religion the natives follow. Jack often finds himself using the pronoun "we" when describing Ryangan customs: "That's what we do in Ryanga when we want to please the spirits—or to appease them: we kill a rooster or a young goat." Significantly, Jack has come to think in Swahili and is having a hard time recovering his English: "When Europeans call, we speak English."

In answer to Maggie's having asked whether, if they went to Ryanga, Jack could find husbands for the four sisters, Jack replies: "I couldn't promise four men but I should be able to get one husband for all of you." Not a bad solution to the Mundy sisters' problems, since "the husband and his wives and his children make up a small commune where everybody helps everybody else and cares for them." The schoolteacher Kate's response brings the house down:

KATE: It may be efficient and you may be in favor of it, Jack, but I don't think it's what Pope Pius XI considers to be the holy sacrament of matrimony. And it might be better for you if you paid just a bit more attention to our Holy Father and a bit less to the Great Goddess . . . Iggie.

A few moments later, Michael's errant father, Gerry, dancing with one of Michael's mother's sisters to the tune of "Anything Goes," hints that group marriage might suit him very well. Later we learn that he has another wife and family in Wales. So in this and other ways Jack may be correct in saying "In some respects [the Ryangans are] not unlike us."

Having identified the family as his characters' major frustration, Friel asks: as constricting, as repressive, as the family may be, where would we be without its support? Kate, head of the predominantly female family, puts it this way:

You work hard at your job. You try to keep the home together. You perform your duties as best you can—because you believe in responsibilities and obligations and good order. And

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> then suddenly, suddenly you realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away; that the whole thing is so fragile it can't be held together much longer. It's all about to collapse, Maggie.

That provincial Irish life is hag-ridden by failure and small-mindedness, that the country still has a long mile to go before shaking off its post-colonial mentality, in no way diminishes the humor, good-heartedness, and courage of its people. Certainly it makes little sense to speak of Ireland as Ben, the Episcopalian from America, speaks of the United States: "It's just another place to live, Elise: Ireland—America—what's the difference?" On the one hand Ireland's best and brightest are constantly leaving, asking themselves, from Camden Town to South Boston and the Bronx to Sydney: "God, Boy, why do you have to leave? Why? Why?" Gar asks himself this question on the eve of his departure from Ballybeg, only to answer: "I don't know. I—I—I don't know." For the exiles in Friel's plays, according to Seamus Deane, "their ultimate perception is that fidelity to the native place is a lethal form of nostalgia." If emigration opens up a dream world of infinite possibility, home is where everything is known. Frank Hardy, returning to Ireland, sensing he will die there, concludes, "At long last I was renouncing chance."

And yet for all that, Friel sees in Ireland an authenticity of culture and personality, an integral society, unchanged in essence since the Middle Ages. In *Philadelphia*, Friel identifies Ireland—and he is only partly ironic here—with the *ancien régime*, having Gar O'Donnell recite as a recurrent motif Edmund Burke's paean to pre-Revolutionary France: "It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the Queen of France, then the Dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision . . ."

A play is not a tissue of ideas, however, or even of words, but rather a spectacle, an experience. Leaving a Brian Friel play, looking for a taxi or hurrying to the pub before closing time, one is less likely to feel depressed by the puritanical repressiveness of small-town Ireland than heartened by an impression of the human spirit asserting itself in the face of impediments: Gar's mordant asides; the risky improvisations of Skinner, who, just before stepping outside into Guildhall Square in Derry, where he will be slaughtered by automatic weapons fire from British troops, signs himself in the visitors' book in the mayor's office: "Freeman of the city." And remembering *Lughnasa*, one smiles, thinking of the play's most celebrated (and, significantly, almost wordless) scene, where the Mundy sisters, inspired by music from their "voodoo" radio, break into spontaneous dance, a pure expression of defiance and transcendence.

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Poems *by Jane Kenyon, Enid Shomer, Walter Griffin & Harvey Shapiro*

Windfalls

The storm is moving on, and as the wind
rises, the oaks and pines let go
of all the snow on their branches,
an abrupt change of heart,
and the air turns utterly white.

Woooh, says the wind, and I stop
where I am, put out my arms,
and look upward, allowing
myself to disappear. It is good
to be here, and not here. . . .

I see the fresh cloven prints of deer
under the apple tree where they come
nosing for windfalls. They must be
near me now, and having stopped when
I stopped, begin to move again.

—Jane Kenyon

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In memory of Jack

Once, coming down the long hill
into Andover on an autumn night
just before deer season, I stopped
the car abruptly to avoid a doe.

She stood, head down, perhaps twenty
feet away, her legs splayed
as if she meant to stand her ground.

For a long moment she looked
at the car, then bolted right at it,
glancing off the hood with a crash,
into a stubbled field.

So I rushed at your illness, your
suffering and death—at the confounding
light of annihilation and release.

—*Jane Kenyon*

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On Jekyll Island

The remains of the Horton-Dubignon Plantation

The marker says "Tabby Ruin"
and we get out of the car to see
the unstoppered walls,

a hearth shaped like a mouthful
of ashes. Overhead, the sky
pours in like history,

so much light, so little
form. "Tabby" was the local
concrete, a porridge

of sand and shells dug from Indian
mounds. Everywhere the stucco
has flaked, oyster shucks

claw toward us, the hands
of slaves who bent to the Sea
Island cotton

that foamed up in this marsh
like a hundred-year tide.
I have been reading about the Grand

Tours of the Europeans: they loved
to be photographed jauntily
posed with classical

ruins. A century before the camera,
they painted the fantasy: afternoon
picnics in a tame

wood, a small orchestra playing,
the minuet danced before
broken Roman columns.

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Here the Africans sang of thorn
plants that would bleed
the color from their

skin. Most of them never set foot
in this house that now feels less
somebody's home

than a temple where weather
is part of the worship
and the accidental is taken

for fate. Even in the painting
where the shot stag is propped
among acanthus

leaves and the gentlemen ride
a fallen pediment,
their stockinged calves

the same incandescent peach
as the sky, the eye is drawn
finally

upward, to the only monumental
they or we are sure of—
the clouds moving by like worn

signets, though we never touch
them, though we know them only
from pages and pages of rain.

—*Enid Shomer*

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In this suspect light

Everything is suspect,
my son's kitchen jar full of pennies
waiting to numb over
my eyes. And the sink
with its pulled plug, gargling

back all that darkness
gathering down hollow tubes. Later
they will tie other tubes
to my body. Make light
of the fact I cannot breathe

with the long one down my throat
probing with its miner's eye
in that suspect hollow where
things of a suspicious
nature grow.

—*Walter Griffin*

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How it ended

1.
In the name of love
she sent me to her accountant
who confirmed I was a loser.

2.
Because I'm drinking
I think I'm writing
but actually
I'm only drinking.

3.
The muse never lets you off the hook.
Tired and sodden, depressed,
whatever, you have to get it up
for her or taste the acid of defeat.

—*Harvey Shapiro*

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Music

Gieseking's incomparable Ravel and Debussy

by Samuel Lipman

The recent release, on the invaluable Pearl label, of a CD containing many of the pianist Walter Gieseking's magnificent pre-World War II recordings of Debussy and Ravel [1] once again brings home to us the fact that, on rare occasions, performance can rise to a level of art indistinguishable from that of the composition itself.

All music—even the most abstruse, such as Bach's *Art of Fugue*—is written to be performed. Nonetheless, music, and especially great music, is always more than its performance. Music exists as notation, and its notation becomes a palpable object; this object does not replace performance, but provides a guarantee of eternality, in contrast to the transience of the performance which seems to be uniquely responsible for giving the music life. And so the small number of Bachs, Mozarts, and Beethovens, and all the rest of the masters, are greater than all the myriad of those who have labored, often with great success, to perform their masterworks.

But to every rule there is an exception. Sometimes, and that sometimes is very rare indeed, a performer brings so much genius to a composer, not just in technical skill but also in elective affinity, that for a blinding instant performer and composer seem inseparable, a single art created by a single artist. For more than two hundred years now, music lovers have spoken with awe of such triumphs of performance; since the coming of the phonograph as a musical phenomenon at the turn of the century, it has been possible to document this miraculous interpenetration of the disparate realms of creation and re-creation.

Of course, despite the innumerable recordings that have been made and preserved, the instances of this miracle remain rare. But rare as these instances are, one thinks immediately of a list including the tenor John McCormack singing Mozart and Hugo Wolf, the soprano Kirsten Flagstad and the baritone Friedrich Schorr singing Wagner, the violinist Fritz Kreisler playing Mendelssohn, the teenage violinist Yehudi Menuhin playing Bruch, the scarcely older violinist Josef Hassid playing numerous encore pieces, the violinist Adolf Busch conducting Bach, the pianist Arthur Rubinstein playing Chopin, the pianist Vladimir Horowitz playing Rachmaninoff, the pianist Alfred Cortot playing Liszt, the conductor Arturo Toscanini performing Beethoven, the conductor Pierre Monteux performing all manner of French and Russian music.

It has long been suspected that Gieseking's playing of Debussy and Ravel belongs on this illustrious list. Born in 1895 to German parents living in France, Gieseking was educated in Hanover, and first began to make his international career in the 1920s. His repertory was wide, and ranged from Bach through Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Schu-

1 Pearl GEMM CD 9449.

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mann, and Grieg to Rachmaninoff; from at least the 1930s on his particular specialty was what is called, perhaps imprecisely, the French impressionist music of Debussy and Ravel.[2]

Gieseking's playing of this French music was quickly recognized by the public and his fellow musicians. By the beginning of World War II, Gieseking had recorded—in addition to such standard works as the Liszt E-flat Concerto and the Franck *Symphonic Variations*—a great deal of Debussy, including both books of the Preludes (twenty-four in all), the *Children's Corner Suite*, the *Suite bergamasque*, several pieces from both sets of *Images*, *Estampes*, and the titanic tone-poem, albeit in miniature, *L'Isle joyeuse*. Gieseking's Ravel recordings, though few, included the monumental suite *Gaspard de la nuit* and two parts of the suite *Miroirs*, including the famous *Alborada del gracioso*.

Gieseking spent World War II in Germany and continued his concert activities both there and in the rest of Europe. Several live-performance recordings from this period have survived, including not very idiomatic 1940 performances of the Rachmaninoff Second and Third Concertos with Willem Mengelberg and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra.[3] There can be no doubt that Gieseking was loyal to the Nazi regime; for example, it appears—and I quote here from the notes to the CD release of the Rachmaninoff concertos—that Gieseking "dismiss[ed] Nazi atrocities as incredible inventions of Jewish hysteria." After the war, according to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, "he was accused (but eventually cleared) of cultural collaboration with the Nazi regime." His first postwar appearances in the United States were delayed by a massive campaign assisted by the newspaper columnist and radio commentator Walter Winchell, but by the early 1950s, he was playing widely in this country, and was once again fully accepted as one of the master pianists of the age. He died suddenly in 1956 during a recording session in London.

It was fitting that his death occurred while he was making records. For beginning about 1950, Gieseking embarked on a series of recordings that by his death a very few years later were to include the complete keyboard music of Mozart, the solo music of Debussy and Ravel, assorted solo works of Bach, Schubert, Brahms, Schumann, and Grieg, three Beethoven concertos, four Mozart concertos, the Grieg and Schumann concertos, a remake of the Franck *Symphonic Variations*, a disc of Mozart songs with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, and some Mozart chamber music. Furthermore, at his death, Gieseking was engaged on a recording of all the thirty-two Beethoven sonatas; by the end, he was only able to complete the recording of twenty-three.

But despite this huge volume of activity, it cannot be said that any of Gieseking's postwar recordings—save those of Debussy and Ravel—were accepted as undisputed masterpieces. His pianistic abilities were hardly in question; his absolute control of tone and articulation, of dynamic contrast and subtle but sharp rhythm, were never in doubt. Nevertheless, critical and professional admiration were one thing, and love was another. Gieseking's Mozart was widely

2 A digression is in order here to explain that impressionism, for all its reasonably precise application in painting, has always been a vexing term in music. By it is always meant Debussy and Ravel, two composers whose lives overlapped and whose compositions are widely thought to resemble each other in their cascades of seemingly improvised notes, blurred harmonies, subtle and shifting tone colors, and lack of obvious formal organization. But so far from being impressionist peas in a pod, Debussy and Ravel, for all their employment of the common harmonic language of early-twentieth-century post-romanticism and pre-modernism, were vastly different in their attitude toward musical structure and musical expression. If anything, it was Debussy who was the true impressionist, rebelling against the demands of traditional musical forms, and Ravel was a classicist, concerned with precise formal structure and expression.

3 Music and Arts CD-250.

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perceived as small-scale and dry; in other repertory, as the late pianist and critic Abram Chasins commented in his authoritative 1957 *Speaking of Pianists*:

> Beethoven, Brahms, and Schumann emerged closer to the summit of Gieseking's interpretative realizations, but they too were not wholly his composers. He was not so comfortable, not so convincing or enlightening in this repertoire.

All in all, there can be no doubt that in life as in death, it was Gieseking's playing of French music that has accounted for the perception of his greatness. The postwar Debussy and Ravel recordings at the time of their appearance were indeed the best available; only the French pianist Robert Casadesus (1899-1972) seemed to approach the level of Gieseking, but in contrast to Gieseking's effortless but always lucid blending of sounds and moods, Casadesus's playing sounded just a bit disjunct and effortful.

For forty years now, Gieseking's triumphs in the music of Debussy and Ravel have been known through his postwar recordings. The Debussy Preludes, made in 1953 and 1954, are standard, and they have now been released on CD;[4] his traversal of the complete solo music of Ravel, made at about the same time, was widely available some years ago on LP,[5] and will doubtless soon appear on CD, as will the remainder of his later Debussy recordings. In their ease, their seductive rhythmic flexibility, their gorgeous splashes of color, all these recordings form one of the landmarks of recorded pianism, and as such will doubtless last as long as this great music can find a public.

Now, however, our assessment of the Gieseking Debussy and Ravel recordings I have just been discussing has been changed by the Pearl reissue of his prewar recordings of some, though sadly not all, of this music. So transcendent is Gieseking's playing on this Pearl disc that it comes to us as a shock, not a shock of surprise or of pain but what Edmund Wilson, quoting Herman Melville, called a "shock of recognition." Our recognition-through-shock is at once of the possibilities of the piano as an instrument, of the possibilities of music in general and of piano music in particular as forming complete emotions, and of our own abilities to go beyond the perception of the beautiful to the perception of the perfect.

I apologize for the perfervid rhetoric. Yet nothing less seems appropriate to describe my own reaction to the Ravel *Gaspard de la nuit* which opens the Gieseking Pearl disc. *Gaspard* is a suite of three pieces, written by Ravel under the inspiration of a set of three prose poems (of the same title) by the minor French writer Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841). Bertrand's extravagant, sometimes macabre, hyper-romantic writing was recognized by Baudelaire as a precursor of Symbolism. The three works that Ravel chose, "Ondine," "Le Gibet," and "Scarbo," deal respectively with a water-sprite who attempts to seduce a man away from the love of a mortal woman, a corpse dangling from a creaking gibbet, and a dwarf-goblin whose "body would turn blue, and translucent like the wax in a candle, and his face grow pale —then suddenly he would vanish."[6]

To describe these apparitions and horrors, Ravel employed the full panoply of post-Liszt pianistic virtuosity, in particular multi-note chords, double notes, and huge, whooshing, glissando-like scales, all encased in the most lush but always consonant chromaticism. Ravel's goal was to write a work for the piano that outdid in difficulty for the performer the nineteenth-century Russian composer Mily Balakirev's *Islamey* (first version 1869, second version 1902); it must be said too that behind *Islamey* must have lain Balakirev's desire to write a work more difficult than the Liszt B-flat major Transcendental Etude *Feux follets*, to this day the summit of unwieldy and complicated pianistic double-note technique.

4 Angel CDH 7610042.

5 Angel LP 5S-3541.

6 Translation by Rollo Myers.

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The first notes of "Ondine," for the right hand alone, are a tremolo, opposing a C-sharp major triad with a single A natural immediately above the triad. But the tremolo is not a simple alternation of triad and single note; sometimes the triad is repeated before the single note is struck. The effect of this complexity, which sets the tone for all of "Ondine," is neither one of regularity or irregularity, but rather of a seamless wash of sound, sometimes sufficient in itself, and sometimes as an accompaniment for a ravishing melody, ultimately without any satisfying conclusion. In "Le Gibet," the sound of the bell tolling for the dead, and the noise of the gallows in the wind, make up a devilish funeral procession. And in "Scarbo," the flash of the evil spirit as he first appears and then disappears becomes through the virtuosity of the player a manifestation of the spectral and the unnatural.

It was Ravel's genius to express, through the most careful and accurate musical thought and notation, what has been called the *Esprit décadent*, the languor, the seeking after sensation, the pursuit of sensuality, so characteristic of the high culture of the end of the nineteenth century. It was Gieseking's genius in this 1939 recording, through the magic of his use of the left and right pedals of the piano, the plasticity of his hands and his mind, to merge his spirit with Ravel's, and express the composer's mood of world-weariness through the eighty-eight keys of the piano. By comparison with this prewar recording of *Gaspard*, his postwar recording is careful, limited in range, and stiff; what had once seemed wonderful in the postwar recording now seems merely excellent, and in art mere excellence always takes second place to revelation.

As with the *Gaspard* on this Pearl CD, so with the rest of the Ravel, and the Debussy as well. The two short Ravel pieces, the first book of the marvelously evocative Debussy Preludes and the two excerpts from the Debussy *Estampes*, seem nothing short of perfection; even the once-hackneyed Debussy prelude "The Girl with the Flaxen Hair" becomes at Gieseking's hands an enchanted visit to the French folk-song of earlier ages. And *L'Isle joyeuse*, an evocation of Watteau's painting *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*, seems without any mechanical restraint at all, and subject only to the unbounded craving for ecstasy typical of the *fin de siècle*. And so close comparison between the prewar recordings and the postwar remakes shows the younger Gieseking to have been an incomparably greater pianist, not because when he was older he was anything but a great interpreter of this wonderful music, but because in the 1930s he managed to become so much more than a pianist, and to become, in a manner of speaking, the composer of the music he was playing.

Pearl, I believe, has now reissued all of Gieseking's prewar Ravel. But there is a great deal of his prewar Debussy recordings awaiting reissue; these recordings include, as I mentioned earlier, the second book of the Preludes, excerpts from the *Images*, the remaining part of *Estampes*, the *Children's Corner Suite*, and the *Suite bergamasque*; there are, in addition, early Gieseking recordings of the two *Arabesques* and the *Rêverie*. One can only look forward to these reissues with the keenest anticipation.

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Art

Hélion's optimism

by Jed Perl

The work of the French painter Jean Hélion, who died in 1987 at the age of eighty-three, is quite well known in Europe and hardly unknown in the United States. The half-dozen or so major retrospectives that have been mounted in Europe in the past fifteen years reflect the interest of curators. And the prominence of Hélion paintings in the commercial galleries of Paris suggests a healthy resale market. This painter, who first came to prominence as a proselytizer for abstract art in the 1930s and then, in the mid-1940s, made a controversial return to realism, was an immensely adventuresome artist and an immensely articulate man, and it is only right that he has been —slowly, slowly—finding his way into the history books. I'm always heartened when I see a mention of Hélion in a catalogue or a book; I know I am not alone in finding that the more I see of Hélion's work, the more I am convinced that he is one of the giants of twentieth-century art; I also know that I speak for many admirers of Hélion's achievement when I say that the place that Hélion appears to be ending up with in twentieth-century art, as a sort of colorful but finally minor figure, seems pitifully unjust.

History grants artists two kinds of fame: fame based on a judgment that the work is of intrinsic value, and fame based on a judgment that, while the work may not ultimately be of all that much interest, the artist's life—and the social world of which the artist was a part—is of some lasting significance. Generally, when an artist's work is felt to be of intrinsic value, historians end up being interested in the life (although there are cases, such as that of Vermeer, where the life contains so little in the way of events that the fame seems to rest almost exclusively on the work). There are cases—especially with artists such as David or El Lissitzky, who were involved in earthshaking social events —where it may be said to be a draw whether the work or the life (and the work's place in the period) interests people more. And then there are artists—like the Carracci or Sir Joshua Reynolds—who, while their work was once admired for its own sake and may still have its admirers, are in the history books mostly because they played such a big role in the art life of their times. I would say that the fame that Hélion is ending up with is mostly based on a recognition of his importance as a promoter of ideas—of ideas about Constructivism, and then, later, of ideas about realism. All of these are ideas that, so far as the standard histories of twentieth-century art are concerned, have not won the day: Constructivism was overtaken by Surrealism and then Abstract Expressionism; realism remains suspect as a late-twentieth-century style.

The exhibition of Hélion's paintings from the period 1976-83 that will be mounted at the Rachel Adler Gallery this month contains the most substantial representation of this final period that we have seen in New York; yet even if the exhibition is as well

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selected as it promises to be, I expect that it will be regarded as a show which is primarily of historical interest. I doubt that there is much hope of Hélion's gaining, now, the place he deserves—the large critical acceptance. The last paintings, with their brash simplifications, cannot be experienced except as a reduction and concentration of elements in the work of earlier decades; and the entire career goes on in a mental universe where the endgames that have colored so much of modern art—the losses of nerve and outright breakdowns, the rejections that are seemingly the only way to wrest completeness out of fragmentation—are virtually unknown. For Hélion, who came to Paris in the early 1920s, the primal experience was not the exquisite melancholy and subtle jokes of the Cubists, who discovered abstraction without ever quite meaning to, but the vehement optimism of the Constructivists, who believed that they could totally reinvent the world. It's the optimism of classic Constructivism that informs Hélion's art, whether the particular forms of the art are abstract or, as so often in later years, intricately realistic. Hélion's last paintings, with their bright flat arabesques of color, are the parting gestures—as telegraphic yet complete as the wave of a hand—of an artist who was exuberantly upbeat to the end.

The trajectory of Hélion's life in art spans the 1920s through the 1980s and is cut in two unequal parts (basically abstract and representational) by Hitler and the war. It's a half-century that we think of as moving from Surrealism to Existentialism, and that we tend to associate with Breton, Sartre, and Beckett. Hélion's work, especially after the war, is hardly without its period flavor—I think of the portraits of young poets, of the tan and white Parisian roofscapes, of beautiful light coming through interestingly situated windows. This is a silvery, afternoon-of-the-modern-movement world that people tend to associate with one artist: Giacometti. Giacometti's subject is the difficulty of understanding what we see; and the tenacity with which he seizes on the expression of a face or the erect posture of a walking figure feels all the more admirable because everything around that unsmiling face or that tall angular figure looks faint—looks as if it's on the verge of disappearing. Hélion, by contrast, presents everything in a painting with the same workmanlike completeness, the same bam-bam-bam matter-of-factness. Hélion's my-cup-runneth-over wealth of imagery can feel a little dopey and kitschy to people who are accustomed to Giacometti's view of a postwar Paris where everything is dying out and passing away. When people find Hélion's paintings overfull, overworked, I think they're pulling away from the unexpected generosity of this work—I think they're thinking, "This should be like Giacometti," and finding it wanting. I know people will say that the point is that Hélion can't paint all this stuff, that he fusses over it too much . . . but I wonder. I felt that way myself when I began to look at Hélion's paintings, but the more I saw of them, the more their fullness made sense. I began to appreciate Hélion's appetites, and once that had happened, the paint-handling (or varieties of paint-handling: this is a long, varied career) felt like an inevitable result—formally inevitable. At some point I was converted to Hélion's way of seeing things.

Conversion is a strong word, but then Hélion's is a career that has kicked off strong emotions for decades now. To many of the abstract painters who were inspired by Hélion's advocacy of abstract art in the 1930s, his return to realism had the aura of a betrayal. When one talked to survivors of those years, many of whom were alive in the 1970s and 1980s, one could still feel the prickle of resentment. Even if they were not entirely unsympathetic to Hélion's later direction, they could never quite forgive him for certain things—especially for the detailed realism of the 1950s. Some would see him as a prodigal son returning to the coziness of the academy; and if one chose to view it that way, one could also see the suavely international bohemian aspects of his life—the marriage to Peggy Guggen-

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heim's daughter Pegeen, and so forth—as somehow connected to a retreat from high seriousness. Plain jealousy was mixed in: some would never forgive Hélion for refusing to be undone by his change of direction. (Or was it the marriage to Pegeen and her suicide—hardly Hélion's fault—that they would not forgive?) But deeper than the jealousy and moral one-upmanship, there was—and remains—incomprehension: the audience could not and cannot understand that Hélion turned away from abstraction yet refused to reject abstraction.

Incomprehension breeds anger and anger breeds more incomprehension, and Hélion knew this, and so in later years he spoke and wrote frequently about his belief that abstraction and representation could exist side by side. This was, as well, a theme in his paintings: he liked to include his abstractions within his representational work (in the form of an abstract painting hanging on a wall, an abstract painting seen in a gallery window); he liked to show parallelisms between abstract and representational forms (especially in the transitional work of the 1940s); and he liked, in some of his last works, to show a figure walking along a street and encountering, also moving along the street, an abstract form—as if to say that the abstract and representational worlds were actually rubbing shoulders. While Hélion often spoke of his return to realism as an affirmation of the things of this world, he also stressed, both in what he painted and what he said and wrote, the idea that representation and abstraction were distinct yet parallel domains—like, perhaps, earth and air. In order to appreciate Hélion's paintings, it is less important to know the autobiography than to grasp the metaphysics that was an outgrowth of the autobiography. For Hélion, art is knowledge, and knowledge is not achieved by gathering together some fragmentary insights but by taking hold of a single large general insight. Everything that Hélion did is grounded in an idealistic view of art, in the view that a work of art—abstract or representational—limns a complete world.

I think that the problem that many people have with Hélion's realist work is that they tend to think about it in terms of a curiosity about appearances. They treat Hélion, in other words, as a Cézannesque artist—as an artist who derives both abstract and representational images from direct perception. (And if they judge him this way, of course he won't come off as well as Giacometti—the last great Cézannist.) Hélion may be a realist but he is not a perceptual painter—the Cézanne-Cubist line has virtually nothing to do with him. His metaphysics is grounded not in things seen but in the idea of art that he inherited from his older comrades in the Constructivist movement of the 1920s and 1930s—Torres-García, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Van Doesburg, Arp. These artists had markedly different views of what a work of art ought to look like, but they all shared one conviction: the certainty that one could imagine a world from the ground up. Every Constructivist style offers a complete world, a completely new complete world. Hélion's first mature works—in which abstract shapes, often gently curving shapes, are suspended against white grounds—are definitely not derived from nature; these paintings describe a world that is invented, constructed. And when Hélion turned to representation he did not want to submit to reality but to create a realistic world that was as complete, as freestanding, as the Constructivist world. Hélion's subjects—an entire table, an entire studio, an entire street—maximalize our vantage point, and it is a maximalism that parallels the Constructivist idea of a painting or sculpture as showing all of an imagined universe, as giving the whole story.

Hélion's paintings are not a response to things seen but a reconstruction of things seen. Certainly this process involves direct observation of nature, both in the form of sketches and studies made in preparation for large figure compositions and in the form of whole paintings done from nature, as many of the still lifes were. Hélion turned out, in the Forties, to be a magnificent painter of the figure—not of the figure as an individual

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but (what is perhaps more difficult) of the figure as an icon, a representative figure. But whatever his considerable skills as a recorder of nature, the critical distinction here must be preserved: Hélion is not attempting to record his response to specific qualities in nature so much as he is presenting his sense of the seen world as a constructed totality. Even when he's painting specifics—the glint of light on a glass, say—there's a generalizing mind at work. Even when Hélion's representation is at its most naturalistic, as in the early 1950s, there is a weight to the edges of objects, an overdetermination to relationships between objects, that takes us very far from perception. It's Hélion's *dis*interest in impressions, his concern with relations, that makes his realism feel to some static, unreal. It is, in a sense, meant to be static, unreal. Hélion is telling us that the painting is an ideal world, an order sufficient unto itself. There is of course movement, flow (as in Constructivism); but in Hélion's work (as in Constructivism) it is an idea of flux and flow that is expressed through the new, constructed nature of the world.

In Hélion's art certain elements (or, as he would have said, signs) appear again and again. Umbrellas, baguettes, newspapers, mannequins, poets, models, chairs, tables, windows, pumpkins, leaves are Hélion's alternatives to the Constructivist's elements —they're as much what Hélion works with as the vertical and horizontal and rectangle are what Mondrian works with. Hélion is putting together a world out of naturalistic elements. The only other artist who does anything quite like this is Léger (and maybe, a little bit, Torres-García). Yet Hélion carries the idea of a naturalistic Constructivism to unprecedented extremes; he takes the Constructivist idea deeper and deeper into representation. The peculiar tingle that we get from the great Hélions has to do with our sense that realism is being redone after Constructivism—and suddenly everything from the cracks in a wall to the articulation of a hand is not so much being perceived as reconstructed. It's the same old world, renewed.

Hélion came of age in the 1920s, at a moment when ideas about art were in a greater state of ferment and transition than they had been for five hundred years—since the beginning of the fifteenth century in Florence. The great Florentine discovery was that a work of art could be a mirror of nature, and that the relationship between art and nature could be rationalized by means of the sciences of perspective and anatomy. The great discovery of early-twentieth-century European art was that the expressive possibilities of art have less to do with our responses to particular figures or objects or situations or scenes than they have to do with our responses to abstract arrangements. Mondrian explained that there are two kinds of expression in art—a specific personal one (the expression on the face, etc.) and a universal one (the expressive power of forms).

Hélion—who was friends with Mondrian—came onto the scene when this idea of there being two kinds of expression was a new idea. At first, in his abstractions, he gave his allegiance to universal form (though the curves in his paintings were, as Mondrian would see it, specific and personal: Hélion always seemed to have an interest in the naturalistic). Ultimately, Hélion's achievement was his bringing the two kinds of expression together again, in the wake of the insights of Constructivism. If before Mondrian and the Constructivists the world of pure form had seemed an outcome, an effect, of the world of specific appearances, after Mondrian it could seem that the world of pure form was primary, the world of specific associations secondary. Hélion, in his later work, set out to rediscover the value of personal expression within the generalizing impulse of universal form. In the 1960s, on the verge of painting his large, elaborate triptychs, he observed, "We would like, of course, to paint complete works, in the style of Carpaccio, Masaccio, Velázquez, Géricault. Technically, it is not utterly impossible. Spiritually, it is refused to us . . . We must break off all relations with nostalgia. The canvas is not an open window giving onto the room in which the still-life sits. It is

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a bare wall, or a public square in which the image will be built like a monument."

Hélion's rejection of nostalgia is significant. Tradition in art has become, more and more, a matter of various forms of nostalgia—nostalgia for perception, nostalgia for classicism. Such nostalgia can produce great art—Giacometti's, Balthus's; and Surrealism, which is in part a modern form of nostalgia, can create a modern framework for nostalgia—nostalgia as a modern idea. Yet there are limits to what the backward glance can bring into the present, and one wonders how much more major art can be squeezed out of an old concept of perception, an old concept of classicism. Sometimes it seems to me that certain artists—Morandi, for example—are overvalued precisely for the endgame, this-is-all-one-can-do-now aspect of their work. And the blunt, I-can-do-it-all quality of Hélion's art is often rejected by people who find it almost appalling that an artist dares to fly in the face of all the loss, all the nostalgia. Yet Hélion is one of the very few artists who have managed to have big careers since the war. (Though of course the work is almost impossible to see: the Museum of Modern Art at the Pompidou Center in Paris has a great Hélion collection but won't show it.) Hélion believed in big statements, in big ideas. He believed painting could do anything and everything. I think the paintings back him up—he seems to me an artist on the scale of Léger or Braque or Arp—and I think that many people refuse to see this because they don't want to reject the old endgames. It's so much easier to stick to the dimming horizons of a genius like Giacometti—who seems to say, "After I've done this head, there's not much left to do." Hélion's art tells us that all kinds of things can be done, even now. It has been my experience that once I've accepted the basic premises of Hélion's art, getting to know that art better has been like walking through a big house where I push open doors and find whole rooms, suites, wings. It's an immense, astonishing career. And it is too little understood and loved. The last paintings may be the hardest to grasp. They're raucously bright—quick, agile, abuzz. In these sketch-like works Hélion is saying, "Goodbye, crazy marvelous world."

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Theater

Playwrights and tyrants

by Donald Lyons

Mikhail Bulgakov, the Aristophanes of Stalinism, was born in Kiev in 1891 to an ecclesiastical and medical family: both his grandfathers were priests; his father a historian of ancient religions; his maternal uncles doctors. He was twenty-six when Lenin took power and twenty-nine when he quit medicine to pursue a career as a writer. Nineteen twenty-five saw his first collection of stories; in that year, too, he was approached by the Moscow Art Theater to adapt his first novel, *The White Guard*, to the stage. The resulting play, *The Days of the Turbins*, was a success. In 1928 he had three plays running in Moscow. But by 1929 all were withdrawn by their respective companies, and indeed from 1927 until his death in 1940—at age forty-eight, from sclerosis of the kidneys—nothing he wrote was published in the Soviet Union. His name and works were covered in a deep silence until the 1960s when certain of his plays were permitted to be revived in Moscow and, in 1966-67, the novel he died revising, *The Master and Margarita*, was published, albeit cut. This novel (now available complete) is a vertiginous collocation of narratives involving the Master, a writer in Moscow not unlike Bulgakov in the 1930s; the Devil, the extremely funny imp of anarchy Woland; Pontius Pilate; and Yeshua (Jesus). The sublime and the laugh-out-loud funny keep startling company throughout.

Bulgakov as dramatist is still only beginning to be known in the world. I first encountered him obliquely—very Bulgakovian, this mode of encounter—at London's Royal National Theatre, which recently staged *Black Snow*, an adaptation by Keith Dewhurst of Bulgakov's unfinished novel *A Theatrical Romance*. Bulgakov began the novel, a satire upon the Moscow Art Theater, in 1936 after more than a decade of hellish and arbitrary frustrations as an independent and then as a staff playwright at MAT, which was under the autocratic headship of Konstantin Stanislavsky and his dimmer partner, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. As *Black Snow* opens, the feckless and despondent playwright Sergei Maksudov has stolen a gun to kill himself only to have one of his scripts, by the craziest of chances, accepted by the Independent (read Moscow Art) Theater. *Black Snow* essentially shows Maksudov's wide-eyed, uncomprehending bewilderment at the byzantine perversities of the famous company. Its walls are adorned with portraits of Reverend Founders Aristarkh Platonovich (off meditating somewhere in India) and Ivan Vassilevich—that is, Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky. The aging and temperamental stars insist on rewriting the youthful roles for themselves. Directors fight for the script. A robotic speed-typist named Polixena Toropetskaya keeps rolling out rewritten pages at the behest of stray bureaucrats. At last, Maksudov is ordered to attend a full reading in the presence of maestro Ivan Vassilevich, who proves the epitome of eccen-

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tric but omnipotent whimsicality. Unable to recall Maksudov's name, the fidgety hypochondriac demands that he remove all references to disease and that the script be rehearsed with the leading man riding a bicycle—an instance of his famous Method. The maestro's senile aunt asks Maksudov why he bothered to write the thing anyway.

Maksudov, plunged into gloom at seeing his play thus abused by lunatics, thinks again of suicide. And here the play, like the novel before it, abruptly breaks off. The RNT production of the fragment managed in quick, elegant strokes to evoke the haunting paradoxes of the Moscow theater world of the 1930s—glamour and misery, joy and fear, hilarity and heartbreak. Ron Cook made the stubborn innocence of the writer appealing; Robin Bailey turned the exquisite maestro into a spoiled, pouting, unpredictable, absurd infant, yet an infant full of power and menace.

Stanislavsky, tyrant at MAT but (as is now becoming clearer and clearer from fresh scholarship) toady to Stalin, richly deserved a satiric impaling, and Bulgakov was uniquely qualified as victim and as comic genius to do the job. Alas, however, *Black Snow/ Theatrical Romance* is but a sketch. What the charming production at the RNT did was to send me to Bulgakov's own plays (such as are available in English), and they prove far more than charming and far more worth producing than *Black Snow*. Indeed, they place Bulgakov among the major dramatists of the century.

It is hardly possible to do more than hint at the dramatic richness and variety of this protean comedian. To begin with, texts and titles are in flux. A typical sequence of events in the life of a Bulgakov play went something like this: play accepted by prestigious company; text wrenched about in rehearsal; numerous revisions simultaneously in existence; premiere delayed; premiere grudgingly allowed in reduced circumstances; production yanked forever after a few performances because of a tantrum in *Pravda*; text(s) unpublished in the writer's lifetime and seeing daylight only in the 1960s or 1980s or 1990s. How did they get on at all? Well, Bulgakov was always "pushing the envelope," demanding total creative freedom —most fantastically in a breathtakingly bold 1930 letter to Stalin, in which he boasts that he has become "a satirist . . . at the exact moment when in the USSR any true satire (satire that enters into forbidden zones) has become absolutely inconceivable" and asks, "am I conceivable in the USSR?" He states nobly that "to prevent me from writing is the same for me as burying alive." This letter was answered by a mysterious personal phone call from Stalin on Good Friday. He refused Bulgakov's request but the mere fact of his bothering to call personally likely kept the secret police away from Bulgakov for the ten years that remained to him. Bulgakov's tragic life gets its latest telling in English in a biography by Lesley Milne, a busy and somewhat scatterbrained grab-bag that scrambles to make order of much that is still unclear.[1] The time may only now be nearing for a full-dress critical biography, first perhaps in Russian.

Bulgakov plays available in English include *Madame Zoyka* (1926), a hilarious and not untimely critique of Lenin's New Economic Policy (ancestor of *perestroika*) set in a Moscow apartment. A dressmaker turns her precious living space into a brothel masquerading as a fashion salon. Her lover is a cocaine-addicted Count mooning about lost dachas; her cousin is a Mosca-like sharpie with many names. Chinese laundrymen-pushers, puffing businessmen, suspicious secret policemen collide in this savage Jonsonian farce that ends, like *Volpone*, bittersweetly.

The Crimson Island (1927) is a backstage story about a company putting on a musical about revolution on a South Sea island (complete with exploding volcano) and trying to satisfy a capricious government censor about the correctness of their play's (in fact highly frivolous) attitude toward this

1 *Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography*, by Lesley Milne; Cambridge University Press, 324 pages, $49.50.

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revolution.[2] There is constant and dizzying interpenetration between play and musical-within-the-play. In *Adam and Eve* (1931) an absent-minded professor (PROFESSOR: "When I was walking along the street, those . . . oh, I've forgotten again . . . you know: small people . . . go to school . . ." EVE: "Children?" PROFESSOR: "That's it! Boys! They whistled at me, and those . . . reddish-brown, furry . . . they bite . . ." ADAM: "Dogs?" PROFESSOR: "Yes. They went for me") invents a ray that can neutralize, even reverse, poison gas. He wants to share it with the capitalists, but party zealots are outraged. When a war breaks out between capitalism and Communism, the Professor and a few of his irradiated friends hole up in a ruined department store in the midst of a wiped-out Leningrad. Seems audacious enough for 1931.

Bulgakov's two dramatic masterpieces are lightly veiled historic parables of the clash between genius and tyrant. In 1929, he wrote *Molière*, an imaginary version of the ruination of the playwright. Church hierarchs and inquisitors, nettled at Molière's assault on them in *Tartuffe*, convince his patron, Louis XIV, that Molière may have married his own daughter. Molière has fawned all his career, but now, seeing the cold, cruel king withdraw favor, cries, "Louis the tyrant!" Parallels in Bulgakov's life do not need underlining. It was, moreover, his experiences with *Molière* that lay behind the fury felt toward Stanislavsky in *Black Snow*. Stanislavsky kept *Molière* in rehearsal for six years, demanding a more positive characterization of Molière from the playwright, demanding ever new interpretations from the actors, demanding this, demanding that. Finally, in February 1936, it played a few performances only to vanish forever after a blast in *Pravda* that echoed with curious closeness the carpings of Stanislavsky.

In 1934-35 Bulgakov wrote *The Last Days* (a.k.a. *Pushkin*) about the erotic, artistic, and political jealousies that swirled about Russia's young national poet in 1837 in the weeks just before his fatal duel with a French admirer of his wayward wife. Besides wife and killer, the play's characters include devoted retainers, rival poets, secret police, salon dilettantes, and Czar Nicholas I—flirtatious in the ballroom but cryptically lethal when confronted by his minions with samples of Pushkin's irreverent verse. Conspicuously absent is Pushkin himself, heard only in his verse. The play's only aficionado of that verse turns out to be a clock-repairman who is really a police spy but who cannot get snippets of the great poet out of his head. The play closes with this shady but winning person reciting Pushkin at a remote railway station in a snowstorm as he accompanies Pushkin's coffin home.

This is but a brief pointer to the dramatic career of Bulgakov; he also adapted *Dead Souls* and *War and Peace* to the stage and wrote in 1939 a play about the young manhood of Stalin. The great poet Anna Akhmatova saluted Bulgakov in an elegy, which has been translated by Stanley Kunitz: "You lived aloof, maintaining to the end / your magnificent disdain. / You drank wine, and told the wittiest jokes." This last phrase is, in the Russian, *ty kak nikto shutil*, which translates, more earthily, as "you cracked jokes like nobody else." And this got into his writing. Reading him, one laughs until one cries. But he was able to marry the animalistic joy of farce to the soberest civic and artistic and human concerns. In this mastery of the comic diapason as in much else he was truly Aristophanic. His ability to evoke such profound, if shadowed, laughter from the darkness of Stalin's Russia was a miracle. How laughingly proud will a new Russia be of Mikhail Bulgakov—a Russia free not just of the Stalinism that smothered him but of the Leninism that, as he well knew, authorized and anticipated Stalinism in every way, including the slaughter of artists.

2 *The Crimson Island* is in *The Early Plays of Mikhail Bulgakov*, translated by Carl R. Proffer and Ellendea Proffer (Indiana University Press, 1972). The other plays discussed are available in *Mikhail Bulgakov: Six Plays*, translated by Michael Glenny, William Powell, and Michael Earley, newly published by Methuen, London (416 pages, £6.99 paper).

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Books

The old devil remembers

by Brooke Allen

As a scourge of pretense, Sir Kingsley Amis has few equals today. His novels are memorable for their stunningly swift summing-up of each character's more ridiculous qualities; this talent was already fully developed in depicting the loathsome Bertrand Welch of *Lucky Jim* (1954), and it continues undiminished in the recent fiction and, now, in Amis's *Memoirs*.[1]

At one point in the *Memoirs* Amis speaks of remembering incidents "not as facts, but as little mental films with a complete set of sound effects." This is an accurate description not only of his imaginative processes but of his storytelling style, with its strong, sharp-focus close-ups; he has made the right choice, then, in composing this autobiographical work not as a straight narrative but as a series of short sketches about various people he has come across.

It is a motley cast of characters. We find everything here from lengthy chats about lifelong friends (Robert Conquest, Philip Larkin), to brief looks at mere acquaintances (Lord Snowdon, Francis Bacon) introduced for the purpose of framing single, usually scurrilous, anecdotes. The format is surprisingly effective, giving Amis the double advantage of deflecting attention from things personal and providing an unusual narrative flow; certain periods of his life are neatly encapsulated by the people involved. Thus the peculiar flavor of Oxford during and immediately following the war is recreated by successive descriptions of a boon companion (Larkin), a representative undergraduate (Bruce Montgomery, a.k.a. Edmund Crispin), and a ridiculous don (Lord David Cecil with his "nanny-goat squeal").

As for avoiding the personal: if these memoirs qualify as autobiography—and they may be forced into service as such, for I suspect we will get no further reminiscences from Sir Kingsley—they are as surprising in their omissions as in their inclusions. We are warned in the introduction that he will discuss neither his work nor his domestic and sexual experiences, and he carries this resolution out to the letter, scarcely mentioning wives, children, or career. His reticence about his family is all the more titillating in the face of what we do know: for instance that Amis, after a divorce from his second wife, now shares a house with his first wife and her present husband.

This silence tantalizes us because of what has always seemed to be the autobiographical nature of Amis's novels. Their readers have tended, to an unusual degree, to confuse the author's personality and beliefs with those of his characters. Amis is acutely aware of this, and cries "foul!" at regular intervals, emphasizing that it is all *fiction*, that he's making it all *up*. But this is a disingenuous protestation, for the nature of his work has positively encouraged the reader to hazard a few assumptions. His novels (with a few ex-

1 *Memoirs*, by Kingsley Amis; Summit, 346 pages, $25.

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ceptions, such as *The Old Devils*) are written through the filtering consciousness of one character, a character who is often closely identifiable, through circumstances, age, or profession, with Amis himself. Unlike some other writers who exploit obviously autobiographical material—Anthony Powell, for instance—Amis makes his protagonists see the world through the distorting mirrors of their own personalities.

Thus for years public opinion has condemned Amis—unfairly, he feels—first as being bibulous and philistine (after *Lucky Jim*), more recently (since *Jake's Thing*, 1978, and *Stanley and the Women*, 1985) as cold and misogynistic. How true is any of this, we wonder?

The *Memoirs* finally offer us Amis's account of himself, though it is necessarily constructed in an oblique and piecemeal fashion. In spite of the celebrated nastiness of much of the book (upon its London publication the brou-ha was audible all the way across the Atlantic), the Amis that emerges is difficult to dislike: boozy, bonhomous, extroverted. The photographs—several of them group shots in pubs—reinforce this picture. Misogynous? Amis comes across less a misogynist than an unregenerate pre-Women's Movement man's man (though of course many people will take this to mean the same thing). It is significant that only two of the *Memoirs*' chapters deal with women, and one of those women is the Iron Lady herself, for whom Amis coyly professes an unrequited physical passion. He enjoys a good laugh and is not overly discriminating about where he finds one; all in all, we see very little of the black misanthropy characteristic of the recent novels' protagonists.

And, though Amis has spared his loved ones embarrassment, he seldom tries to spare himself. One of his more likable qualities is his willingness to play the stooge, as when he ungraciously criticizes a meal served to him by Mrs. Peter Quennell, who turns on him with "You're a great fat bum. . . . What you write is a load of rubbish and you can't even speak French. You are extremely boring and very rude and who the hell do you think you are anyway, I'd like to know." Amis takes this, and other indignities, manfully.

He is at his most personal when describing his childhood in a South London suburb. Though he was not particularly close to either parent, the very lack of common ground is made retrospectively moving, and when Amis writes of his mother as "the first of the appallingly long line of figures in my life whom I have come to value altogether more highly, to appreciate the uniqueness of, now they are gone," he crystallizes the note of regret that reappears at intervals throughout the book.

He is hilarious when describing the petit-bourgeois mores of his childhood, such as his mother's characterization of his lunatic aunt as "just a bit funny," or her horror when the depraved word "honeymoon" is uttered within earshot of the teenaged Kingsley.

To say that much of the book is good-natured is not to deny the venom of other parts, for the sketches range from the fulsome to the vicious. One gets the distinct impression that many of these anecdotes have been carefully squirreled away for decades awaiting this opportunity for an airing. But then, Amis never lays any claims to being above natural vindictiveness, and certainly his career has not been notable for minced words. That this book is to be no exception we discover on the very first page, where Amis describes how much he "disliked and was repelled by" his paternal grandfather, moving on in short order to the grandmother, "a large dreadful hairy-faced creature who lived to be nearly ninety." Clearly this is not going to be a lyrical or rhapsodic evocation of childhood on the Proustian model; Amis begins as he means to go on.

There is one technique that Amis deploys again and again, both in his sympathetic sketches and his malevolent ones, and it obviously springs from the same guiding principle as his "rule, when reviewing a book by a known friend, to slip in one adverse remark"—a rule which he admits is in the

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cause of seeming disinterest, though it provides the added advantage of allowing him to spice the stew with a little (surely harmless?) bitchery. Thus portraits of friends whom he undoubtedly admires—Anthony Powell, for instance, or Peter Quennell—are either enriched or debased, depending on the reader's appetite for gossip, by the occasional low blow.

Existing side-by-side with this technique is its opposite, used by Amis even more openhandedly: that of capping an entire chapter of disparagement with one grudging crumb of very faint praise indeed. Thus in his section on Malcolm Muggeridge Amis "softens" several pages of scurrilities with the final qualification that "nobody who gave so much genuine and very largely harmless pleasure and entertainment to millions can be said to have wasted his time"—note the felicitous use of the word "harmless"—and, after a devastating attack on James Michie's character and literary talent, allows as how his translations at any rate are "accomplished and elegant."

One of the few disappointments in this otherwise spirited book is that a good deal of it is republished from other sources (mainly Amis's collection of essays, *What Became of Jane Austen?*) and with a minimum of new material or rewriting. The sections on Larkin, Dylan Thomas, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the City of London School, Cambridge, and Amis *père* are all repeat material, some of it decades old; for example, the Yevtushenko chapter, excellent and charming though it is, dates from 1962 and 1970, and although Amis appends a few paragraphs to cover the subsequent twenty years, one might have hoped for a more synthesized overview. This is especially true of the Dylan Thomas chapter, which dates from the Fifties; for what Amis has to say here is of interest, and is it not possible that he might have even more to say so many years on?

But as Amis keeps telling us, "this is not a work of literary criticism . . ." It is an oft-repeated litany, and each repetition further emphasizes its untruth. But by disclaiming literary criticism, Amis is able to squeeze in a good deal of literary *opinion*, and very pleasingly opinionated it is, too.

In fact, this book *is* in many ways a work of literary criticism, or rather a statement of an artistic philosophy (though Amis, of course, would despise such highfalutin jargon). It is a philosophy that is implicit in his editing of Larkin's early work (from "Cold it looked, cold and deserted" to "It looked cold and deserted"); in his thoughts on the demise of jazz ("The long-playing record, perhaps the deadliest blow, was invented in 1948, doing away with the concentration and concision enforced by the 78 record"); in his reflections on literary self-importance (Arnold Wesker "was convinced that I could not fail to like his then new play, *Their Very Own and Golden City*—despite its title, he might have added, though that would have been asking rather a lot, I do see"), and its opposite, self-effacement.

Especially pertinent to this last quality is the chapter on Elizabeth Taylor (novelist, not movie star), not only in its capacity as one of the regrettably rare appreciations of that underappreciated author, but in light of Amis's own career and his view of and presentation of himself. He writes movingly about Taylor's lack of pretensions, her neglect by the literary establishment, and of the fact that her themes are not considered "important" enough for her work to receive the very highest esteem.

> It is a sad and awful comment on our culture, on the way we regard our writers in general, that what has led to the neglect I mentioned, to the fact that when people make lists of leaders in the field her name rarely comes up, is that very self-effacement described earlier. . . . Important! Fearful contemporary word, smacking of the textbook, the lecture-hall, the "balanced appraisal." . . . As the philosopher J. L. Austin remarked in another context, importance isn't important. Good writing is.

Amis displays a sad awareness that writers, in this day and age, tend to be taken only as

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seriously as their arrogance prompts them to take themselves. Among his most valuable critical contributions are his attacks on cant and self-puffery, and he has taken it as something of a mission, both in his novels and his reviews, to glorify the unpretentious and to cast his own lot with artists who are usually considered minor. He will boldly use the word "genius" in association with Ian Fleming, while scorning D. H. Lawrence's claim to that title; his favorite poet is Housman, while he despises Pound; he finds *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* "a piece of pretentious bullshit."

Over a long career Amis, admirably careless of his standing in literary and academic circles, has refused to present himself or his work as "important"; as a result his reputation is lower than it should by rights be. His anti-bullshit crusade has in essence changed little since *Lucky Jim*, and in the *Memoirs* one is able to trace the evolution of this attitude. It is mixed, of course, with the famous anti-intellectual posture, a posture that suited Jim Dixon and his youthful creator very well but has become, these many years later, rather threadbare. At school Amis discovers that "the theatre was boring (though the cinema was not), you could keep Dadaism and all that, architecture ought to be comprehensively done away with"; at Oxford he is trotted through the required syllabus, and recalls that his study of Old and Middle English texts induced "hatred and weariness." This was a pose, developed among Amis's Oxford friends and best exemplified in Philip Larkin; but "whatever one made of it in private, most people at Oxford, not just Philip, treated literature in this sense [the academic] as a pure commodity, a matter for evasion and fraud, confidence trickery to filch a degree."

That all this is aimed at the pretentious rather than at the genuinely intellectual goes without saying, and Amis betrays a touching disappointment when he discovers that Cambridge dons never speak of literature among themselves: even at the University College of Swansea, he writes wistfully, "a not necessarily very profound remark about Traherne or Tennyson would come up now and then." Most of all, the seriousness with which he views literature is evident in his passionate feelings about education. He spent fourteen years as a university teacher (Swansea, Cambridge, Princeton, and Vanderbilt) and speaks of academic life with authority and surprising enthusiasm. He expresses himself strongly about declining educational standards; his only gripe against *la belle* Thatcher is the effect her policies had of lowering them even further.

Two of Amis's teaching stints were in America. Writing of the first, at Princeton, he reaches the heights of nostalgia, conjuring up an ebullient image of the nicest side of American life in the late Fifties: "And such parties—drinking was only the start of it: you danced, played charades, played the adverb game, played hearts, took endless photographs, went on to the movies, to hear jazz, to bowl, to the football game, to sledge, to skate, into bed at 4 a.m., well into brunch by 11:30 the next, or rather the same, day." It is enough to make Americans who can remember those times sad—but not so sad as the chapter Amis devotes to his stint as a visiting professor at Vanderbilt.

This is almost the only chapter that aims to be consistently insulting, and if Amis's memories are correct, one can only conclude that those insults are richly deserved. To argue that most Southerners would hardly consider Nashville representative of the entire South—and would certainly not accept its own valuation of itself as the South's Athens—seems petty in the face of the virulent, pervasive racial prejudice with which Amis and his wife were confronted everywhere. To find that such ugliness and red-neckery were the accepted rule at a respectable University only twenty-five years ago is a shock, and must make us wonder how thin today's more civilized veneer is.

Happily, the scathing tone of the Nashville chapter is uncharacteristic. Generally speaking Amis seems to share the opinion of one

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of his Old Devils: there are no bad people, only awful ones. We have all been aware for many years of Amis's genius for re-creating the awful; now we know that he has a gift for the affectionate, too.

Modernism in all things

Paul Johnson The Birth of the Modern: World Society, 1815-1830. HarperCollins, 1,095 pages, $35

reviewed by James Bowman

In Shakespeare, the word "modern" most often means something like "commonplace" or "day-to-day," as in the case of the justice in Jaques's Seven Ages of Man speech who is "full of wise saws and modern instances." That which is most familiar to us is often hardest for us to see; those things which we most take for granted as a permanent part of the nature of things are likely to be the very contingencies which distinguish our own times from those that went before and those that will come after.

Now, whether it is because we are supposed by some to be living in what is called, with characteristic whimsy, the "postmodern" era or for some other reason, we seem to want to bring those contingencies into focus in order to understand how we got to where we find ourselves in the late twentieth century. A few years ago Paul Johnson took on our own century in *Modern Times*, an excitingly original if occasionally quirky reinterpretation of recent history from a perspective sufficiently detached from it that the colors and proportions all looked different. His latest book, *The Birth of the Modern*, is an even more ambitious attempt to get a purchase on what makes us us; and it is even more successful.

The title alone proclaims what in anyone but a historian of the highest rank would be a fatal, overweening ambition: "World Society" is not a phrase which many of us would find it comfortable to use at all, let alone to take as an accurate description of a subject we profess to understand well enough to write a book about; "The Birth of the Modern" can plausibly be located in any century at least from the eleventh onward, depending on what you consider to be the most important of its attributes. To pin it down to the fifteen years from the battles of New Orleans and Waterloo to the accession of Louis-Philippe requires an extraordinary degree of—shall we say?—self-confidence.

It would be a mistake, however, to quarrel with Paul Johnson's basic premises, because to do so would be to deprive ourselves of the exhilarating experience of what he is able to do with them. Like a novelist or a dramatist, he requires from us a willing suspension of disbelief (Coleridge first coined the phrase during these fifteen years) in order that he can work his magic upon us. It is true that sometimes he seems to be trying to do too much; occasionally we feel that the analogies between early-nineteenth- and late-twentieth-century phenomena are a little like Fluellen's between the nativities of Henry V and Alexander:

> There is a river in Macedon, and there is also moreover a river at Monmouth. It is called Wye at Monmouth, but it is out of my prains what is the name of the other river—but 'tis all one, 'tis as like my fingers is to my fingers, and there is salmons in both. If you mark Alexander's life well, Harry of Monmouth's life is come after it indifferent well.

But in this book, such strained parallels seem to matter little, because their artifice merely accentuates the drama of history—which is captured here as few modern historians can capture it.

In fact, reading *The Birth of the Modern* is a little like reading *War and Peace*: you are bewildered by the mass of detail, much of which seems at first glance to have little to do with the birth of the modern, but you never feel that it interferes with the majesty and sweep of the larger story, which emphatically does. How does a historian organize an

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enormous miscellany of facts which, however fascinating, are not news in such a way as to preserve both the outlines of his thesis and the dramatic freshness and coherence of his story? He hasn't the freedom that the novelist has to create his own facts, but, if he is Paul Johnson anyway, he can use a novelist's art to impart even to a set of commonplace events a universal significance. Here is how he does it in a typical instance, his Chapter Six called "Honorable Gentlemen and Weaker Vessels."

Chapter Five has dealt with the election of 1818 in England, in which the paradigmatic contest was fought in Westmorland between the Lowthers, sons of the Earl of Lonsdale, and the radical Henry Brougham. Wordsworth and Southey backed the Lowthers, which seemed scandalous to Keats, Shelley, and others of the younger Romantics to whom Wordsworth's conservatism was already beginning to look like the betrayal it seemed later to Browning in his poem "The Lost Leader." Johnson takes us through the battles among the intelligentsia over radical politics—so much like those of our own times, though he doesn't attempt to make any detailed comparisons—and ends with the Peterloo massacre, the Six Acts, and the Cato Street Conspiracy. "Terrorism was in the European air," Johnson writes, but we are made to see that it appeared just as any genuinely popular uprising was becoming less likely.

Then, suddenly, he ends the chapter with the death of George III, the ascension to the throne of the Prince Regent as George IV, and the return to England of "Prinny's" estranged wife. "Thus began the Queen Caroline Crisis which transfixed the entire nation for a year, and from which the nation emerged transformed beyond recognition." But we are going to have to wait for nearly a hundred pages to find out how. Chapter Six begins with an account of the Prince's unpopularity and something of the miserable state of the royal family during the years up to 1820, when the King was mad, his sons were all rogues, and the Queen kept four of her grown-up daughters virtual prisoners in what they called "the Nunnery" at Windsor Castle to attend on her.

The story of these daughters' pathetic attempts to marry and establish themselves in life independent of their appalling family leads on to an account of relations between the sexes generally—but only after a long digression on the Prince's architectural plans for London and the changes in the city recorded in the drawings and paintings of George Scharf, Scharf providing the excuse for a large number of vignettes of London street life during the period. The visual descriptions which accompany the discussion of Scharf's pictures dovetail nicely with a look at men's and women's fashions—men's becoming more somber, women's more lively—which, in turn, leads to the assertion that now, "for the first time, men handed over to women the leading role in sartorial display."

If ever there were a natural cue for some profound thinking on sexual differentiation this is it, but Johnson shoots off on another tangent with the mention of umbrellas, which replaced swords as a masculine accessory during this period. "Thereby hangs a tale," he writes, but the tale turns out to be a succession of tales about dueling, that (almost but not quite) uniquely masculine institution that was itself going gradually out of fashion in the 1820s. Skipping from Britain to France to the United States to Germany to Russia and back to Britain, Johnson ends his "tale" with the satisfaction felt by most women at the decline of men's dueling *and* a mention of the only all-female duel known to him during the period—between Princess Metternich and Countess Kielmansegg, "both women emerging slightly wounded."

After yet another tangent, on women gamblers, he seems at last ready to redeem a now almost-forgotten promise by mentioning again the public conflict between George IV and Queen Caroline and how it could be said "to illuminate, illustrate, and in a curious way ennoble the battle of the sexes that was taking place in countless

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humbler households." By now, however, we are beginning to be wary, and, sure enough, it turns out that he is first redeeming another promise, implied in his discussion of fashion, to deal with the "humbler households" first.

A plethora of stories of marriage and women's rights, of the increasing number of divorces, of adultery and all manner of extramarital sex, including incest, of wife-beating, cross-dressing, birth control, and illegitimacy, of women in the arts and romantic anti-feminism take up another fifty pages before everything is tied up in the story of Elizabeth, the wife of Captain Johnstone, who ran off with Lord Brudenell 1823. Her divorce and remarriage, by way of an Act of Parliament and the decree of an ecclesiastical court, took three years and involved a substantial cash settlement upon the captain, but when Brudenell offered Johnstone an opportunity to receive "satisfaction" in a duel, the latter replied to his Second that he should "tell Lord Brudenell that he has already given me satisfaction: the satisfaction of having removed the most damned bad-tempered and extravagant bitch in the kingdom." So much for the gentlemanly duel! Later his marriage, too, went on the rocks and Brudenell, by that time Lord Cardigan, went on to lead the Charge of the Light Brigade.

Here, finally, we return again for the last time to Queen Caroline's trial before Parliament on charges of adultery, the bare narrative account of which by this time seems to be scarcely more than another in the extraordinary series of sexual shenanigans which we have been hearing about for as long as we can remember. What turns out to be remarkable about it is that the King, whose own liaisons were well known, found to his surprise that he could no longer appeal to that universally acknowledged double standard for men and women which has by no means completely died out even today. This was partly because of his own unpopularity and widespread sympathy, especially among the radicals, for the Queen and partly because of more subtle changes in the social infrastructure, all of which this chapter has documented at length. In the end the case had to be dropped as not only the House of Lords but the whole of Parliament and the country came to believe that, although she was guilty, the Queen should not be convicted.

Mrs. Arbuthnot, the confidante of the Duke of Wellington, wrote that respectable people's consciousness of the Queen's guilt had to be tempered by the reflection that "the King is worse, and if she is bad he made her so." The Duke himself, on being required by a mob to proclaim his allegiance to the Queen, replied by saying: "God save the Queen! and may all your wives be like her!" Their two views of the case illustrate not only the division in the country but also the ways in which public opinion in general and changing social attitudes about the relations between the sexes in particular were beginning to influence politics. Even the section on dueling proves in retrospect to have been relevant as another example of how masculine honor was beginning to seem less and less adequate as either a context or a pretext for governance by a socially elite oligarchy.

The last two pages of the chapter seem to return again to its earlier interest in the advancement of women with an account of "the first woman scientist of real consequence," Mary Somerville, an altogether happier figure with which to round out the recital of so much woe. Of course it provides the transition to Chapter Seven, "Forces, Machines, Visions," about scientific and artistic developments from Sir Humphry Davy's invention of the miner's safety lamp to J. M. W. Turner's revolt against "the restraints of Old World painting," undertaken, paradoxically, at the last gasp of the belief that artists and their "scientific contemporaries were involved in the same task: to explain the Earth . . . to those who lived on it." But it is appropriate as an ending in another sense, too. For no matter how awful the world he so exhaustively chronicles or how dark the future that world's innovations adumbrate, to use one of his own favorite words, Johnson's tone is upbeat. Al-

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though history may keep returning to the patterns set up in 1815-1830, he believes in progress.

It is a very English, or Anglo-American, point of view—which is both the weakness and the strength of this volume. Britain is throughout at center stage, which in itself is no bad thing. Not only was it the leading industrial and military power of the world during this period, not only was it at the forefront of developments in science, medicine, exploration, engineering, art, literature, politics, and economics as well as intellectual and social attitudes, it was also home to a large part of the most interesting people in the world at the time. And one of its most prominent legacies, the belief that the Anglo-Saxon race is uniquely qualified to bring civilization to the rest of the world, though it is hardly mentioned here, is still present as the unacknowledged principle according to which the book has been written. Johnson himself, much more than most of us in the waning years of "the American century," is the spiritual heir of the age he chronicles.

It is true that he has a vast and impressive knowledge of the histories of other European, Middle Eastern, Asian, and Latin American countries—though sometimes he will surprise you, by getting the year of Wordsworth's birth wrong, for example —but his heroes are nearly all British or American, and much more British than American. The major characters of this vast and novel-like tapestry are Byron and Jane Austen, Wellington and Mrs. Arbuthnot, John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, Coleridge and Wordsworth and Southey, too, Turner and Brunel and Humphry Davy and George Stephenson and even poor William Huskisson, the story of whose death in the world's first fatal railway accident forms the appropriately seriocomic endpiece to the book. These are the people he feels most comfortable with and the ones who emerge with the most dramatic depth. We like and sympathize with them in the way that we do with Pierre and Prince Andrei and Natasha in *War and Peace*, whereas the foreigners come off for the most part like Tolstoy's Frenchmen.

Even the layout of the chapters stresses the Anglo-American bias. Chapter One is called "A Special Relationship" (guess which relationship that one is) and, after an interlude on the Congress of Vienna, Johnson goes on to Chapter Three, about "The End of the Wilderness"—which means, almost exclusively, the British and American conquest and settlement of the world's remaining wild places. Then we have Chapter Four, on Britain as "World Policeman," and Chapter Five, on "Can the Center Hold?", where "the center" is clearly the British intelligentsia. After the two chapters on sex and science (most of it British) mentioned above, we have "Masques of Anarchy" and "Enormous Shadows," about the benighted beliefs and practices of those parts of the world where the Anglo-Saxon writ did not run, between which two chapters is one on (mainly) British ideas on health and sickness of mind and body.

And so it goes. I mention this bias not to belittle the book because of it or even to express shock that historical revisionism can have extended to apology for political moralism and imperialism, which Johnson rightly sees as two sides of the same coin. I share his biases and many of his beliefs, but I can't help thinking that "World Society" is a misnomer. What he is really writing about as "the modern" is the progressive, scientific, and democratic view of the world that has been the chief legacy of Anglo-Saxon culture to modernity. Now that that legacy is once again coming into prominence because of changes in Eastern Europe and Latin America, this outlook on history has a new topicality and persuasiveness, but it is still not one that most non-English speakers would recognize as their own.

That this particularity is for the most part unacknowledged is a weakness in a book that pretends, as Johnson's does, to universality. But it is also a strength—even an indispensable attribute of it. For in practice the

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nearest approach to true universality in history, as in fiction, is always the product of somebody's point of view. Paul Johnson's has a Tolstoyan sweep and his materials a Tolstoyan mass, but he might also have taken his epigraph from Tolstoy:

> And just as astronomers' conclusions would be idle and uncertain were they not based on observations of the visible sky in relation to one meridian and one horizon, so would my conclusions be idle and uncertain were they not founded on that understanding of goodness which was and will be the same always and for everyone, and which has been revealed to me by Christianity and can always be verified in my soul. The question of other creeds and their relation to the Deity I have not the right or possibility of deciding.

Here is both an artful history and a history that approaches high art because of its author's skill in seeing the commonplace with fresh eyes. That anyone would still dare to attempt such a thing on this scale suggests a reassuring continuity not only with the nineteenth century but with the centuries before.

The soul of a saint

Saint Augustine Confessions. Translated from the Latin, with an introduction and notes, by Henry Chadwick. Oxford University Press, 311 pages, $24.95

reviewed by C. H. Sisson

Augustine was born in 354, in North Africa. His parents may have been Berbers, but thoroughly Latinized, much as a French North African might have been in our own day. His father was a pagan, his mother a Christian. Mother seems to have been allowed to bring up the boy in her own religion, and father was coaxed or converted to it shortly before he died. There was, early, question of Augustine being baptized, but the rite was deferred out of a theological prudence which suggested letting him commit a few youthful sins before they became damnable, as they would have been in a member of the Church. The young Augustine turned his back on his mother's Catholic Christianity and adopted the bundle of heresies known as Manichaeism. No doubt that seemed more stimulating intellectually, and he probably imagined that he was displaying his independence of mind. The asceticism practiced by the Manichees was not such as to prevent him from picking up a girl, when he became a student at the University of Carthage, but he lived with her in technical faithfulness for fifteen years. He became a teacher of rhetoric—one might say, literature—and at least on one occasion entered a poetry competition, though he conscientiously gave short shrift to a soothsayer who asked what fee he would give to secure victory.

We find ourselves, in the *Confessions*, in a world in some respects strikingly like our own, although one should beware of facile comparisons. Instead of the television there were gladiatorial shows; sexual diversions were widely available, but women still knew their place; and when, in Milan, Augustine's career seemed to demand a marriage which would bring a useful amount of money with it, his faithful concubine was packed off to Africa, leaving behind with father the son they had accidentally had. Augustine then gave up the idea of marriage, but he could still take another concubine. In the *Confessions* he is entirely open about the importance for him of sexual pleasure, but an even greater weakness was, perhaps, his love for intellectual diversions. There are times when one suspects him of being little better than an intellectual.

Henry Chadwick begins his introduction by recalling another set of confessions—those of Rousseau—which he rightly says have little but the title in common with those of Augustine. Rousseau's conception of confession no doubt has its own historical background—in Protestant individualism,

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to go back no further. More patently, it is the source of that stream of Romantic literature which has turned into the contemporary trade in sexual revelations. Chadwick is undoubtedly justified in regarding Augustine's *Confessions* as being primarily a record of a "soul wandering away from God and then in torment and tears finding its way home through conversion." The real significance is not in any details of individual biography—which are sparingly given, in any case—but in the fact that the story is that of "the entire created order." The first nine books contain such of Augustine's personal story as is to be told. Chadwick makes the illuminating comment that it is the last four chapters, dealing respectively with "Memory," "Time and Eternity," "Platonic and Christian Creation," and "Finding the Church in Genesis 1," which make this wider application explicit.

It is, however, largely to their biographical interest that the *Confessions* have owed their popularity through the centuries. Moreover, the volume probably owed its existence to the need for public justification of a past "in which," Chadwick says, "numerous enemies and critics showed an unhealthy interest." Yet it is primarily the mind of the philosopher and theologian which is here displayed. Augustine is a man with a passion for analysis and argument. He wants to get it right, as much as any scholar or scientist, and he is closer to the modern academic than he is to such a prodigy of charity as Saint Francis. If it was a youthful argumentativeness which took him into Manichaeism, it was by virtue of the same talents that he managed to defer baptism for so many years while he explored the logical niceties of the Manichaean and Catholic positions, as well as such scientific truth as he could check. "I particularly noted the rational, mathematical order of things," he says, "the order of seasons, the visible evidence of the stars." He noted where Mani "was not in agreement with the rational explanations which I had verified by calculation and had observed with my own eyes." His favorite companions, without doubt, were young men of a turn of mind like enough to his own for them to be able to appreciate his brilliance.

Augustine's career ran its course in a world in which the political empire of Rome was breaking up, and the ecclesiastical empire which was to succeed it was still far from having taken shape. Paganism was still respectable and there was endless dispute between religious groups. There was plenty of work for academic and contentious minds, and the arguments were no doubt confused by the struggles which went on among the various communal and political interests. In Africa the Donatists were powerful, and Chadwick points out that as Bishop of Hippo Augustine was in fact "presiding over a minority community," while the *Confessions* make "not even the most oblique reference to the existence" of the dominant sect. For their part the Donatists seem to have been no less absolute than the Catholics in claiming that they alone were the true Church; they even demanded the re-baptism of converts. This threat to Catholic unity was obligingly brought to an end, as late as the seventh and eighth centuries, by the Saracens who destroyed the African Church.

Although it would be unfair to present the *Confessions* to the general reader as if they were merely the recollections of an interesting personality, it would be equally misleading to convey the impression that the book is primarily a theological treatise. It is full of details which open our eyes on the ancient world as it was shortly before Rome fell to Alaric in 410. We get a vivid glimpse of student life in Carthage, an impression of the fascination of gladiatorial shows, of the ways students in Rome cheated their teachers out of their fees, of the working of patronage in official employment, of the status of women, both wives and concubines, of the position of slaves and the violence to which they were subjected. There are even glimpses of Augustine himself as a baby: "I began to smile, first in my sleep, then when awake," though the author fairly adds: "That at least is what I was told.

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. . . I do not actually remember what I then did." But he remembers his school days when, strangely, he seems not to have done very well at Greek, and many pages are devoted to a pear-stealing expedition he took part in, something one gathers he would not have bothered to do without the benefit of bad company.

Altogether, the *Confessions* is a book which every literate reader should be acquainted with. Augustine was a powerful figure among the forces which propelled Latin and biblical influences into the Middle Ages in such indissoluble association that they have since always been at the center of Western civilization. There may be some dispute as to how far that center still holds, but if it does not, it can only be because we stand on the threshold of one of those great cultural changes not less significant than the fall of ancient Rome. In either case Augustine must have a special meaning for us. In terms of literary culture, Rome had long been in decline in his day, and we stand about the same distance from Shakespeare and Milton, and the other great European figures of the seventeenth century, as Augustine did from Virgil and Horace. It is a situation which should incline us to look skeptically on the literary pretensions of the present age. There was literary production enough, and literary talk enough, in Augustine's day; he felt bound to make the point that "a statement is not true because it is enunciated in an unpolished idiom, nor false because the words are splendid." Chadwick draws attention to the fact that, "in several places in the *Confessions* and elsewhere, Augustine's term for contemporary pagan culture was 'loquacity.'" The word might do to describe our own, in which the flood of media-borne words threatens to drown us all. Augustine of course had all the skills and tricks of his decadent literary times. He delighted in "polished epigrammatic antitheses as much as any pagan writer. Only in his case," our translator adds, "the epigram almost always carries a sharp point directed to a religious target of extreme seriousness for him." Like his contemporary Jerome, who produced the great Latin Bible to replace the inadequate versions then current, he retained something of the force and terseness of the classical period.

The present edition of Augustine's historic work is introduced and edited in a manner which will make it readily accessible to readers with little knowledge of the historical and theological background, as well as to students within whose fields such matters are supposed to lie. Chadwick's learning is beyond dispute, and he manages his vast fund of information about both the early and the contemporary Church with business-like assurance and orderliness. The footnotes here are elegant and economical, and the same might be said of the eighteen pages of introduction, which cover exactly the ground on which most readers are likely to find a little guidance helpful. It must be said that the translation itself is business-like rather than seductive, and some non-specialists may still find Pusey's version more readable. However that may be, one cannot be otherwise than grateful for this scholarly and unfussy edition.

Around the world in eighty days

John Lukacs The Duel: 10 May-31 July 1940: The Eighty-Day Struggle Between Churchill and Hitler.
Ticknor & Fields, 258 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Harold James

It is a truism that the Second World War profoundly altered the shape of world politics. It destroyed the balance of power maintained by old Europe, leaving a vacuum that was filled by the U.S. and the USSR, both of which promptly intruded deeply into the European world. The war also shattered the previous social order of Europe, the order dominated by increasingly nervous and defensive elites; and, at least in the western part

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of the continent, it launched a new world of mass consumption and surprisingly stable democratic politics.

John Lukacs has already written a powerful and innovative study of the first half of the Second World War, *The Last European War* (1976), which examines events up to the German invasion of Russia. In *The Duel* he gives his readers a coda that deals with the period between Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister and Hitler's decision, on July 31, 1940, to prepare for an eastern offensive against Stalin's Russia. Vividly written and fast-flowing, the book is an account of the personalities directing the European conflict in the critical months between the battle of France and the U.S. agreement in 1940 to supply Britain with some outdated destroyers, an agreement that marked the beginning of an ever closer Anglo-American collaboration.

It should be said that *The Duel* is a compelling read, neatly spiced with precisely observed details, apt philosophical comments, and quirky expressions of unabashed personal prejudice. For example, Lukacs reflects on the sounds that the names "Hitler" and "Churchill" make, describing the former as "hard-hitting, direct, determined and cold," the latter perhaps more interestingly as "pouting, aristocratic, flecked by sunlight," with a final "short, brilliant, spring-like sound of a rill." There are also bonbons for those who appreciate pithy stereotypes as summaries of national character: "The English people are not intellectual," Lukacs writes, while the Germans ("by and large a humorless people") were educated, "but the question may be raised: were they very intelligent?"

Fortunately, there is rather more to this book than such *aperçus*. Like Lukacs's earlier book on the subject, *The Duel* is in a sense an account of the "last European war," the self-immolation of traditional Europe. The decisions made at the end of July 1940 involved the extra-European Great Powers in Europe's destiny, and with this involvement the failure of German aggression became inevitable. It is true that it took five more years of fighting; and it is also true that the outcome of Germany's attack on the Soviet Union—code-named Operation Barbarossa—could not have been known in advance. Many in Germany and Russia (and also in Britain and America) predicted the rapid collapse of Stalin's armies. Lukacs is quite happy to accept the plausibility of those predictions, for in his view Barbarossa did not stand at the center of Hitler's war strategy.

The most controversial parts of the book's argument are its explanations of why Lukacs's Eighty Days matter so much, and of why the European conflict opened out into a worldwide struggle. According to Lukacs, Germany attacked Russia because this was the best way to knock Britain out of the war, to leave her isolated and obliged to sue for peace. In support, Lukacs quotes General Franz Halder's well-known account of Hitler's decision to invade Russia: "England's hope is Russia and America," wrote Halder. "If hope on Russia is eliminated, America is also eliminated, because enormous increase in the influence of Japan in the Far East will result from the elimination of Russia. Russia is the factor on which England is mainly betting." Even in August 1941, at the height of the success of Barbarossa, Hitler was still saying that the aim was "to finally eliminate Russia as England's allied power on the continent and thereby deprive England of any hope of a change in her fortunes with the help of that last existing Great Power."

Originally, Hitler had believed that the fall of France would have this effect, and that Britain would be unable to continue the struggle. Indeed, there were people in Britain arguing for peace. Hitler knew this and made every effort to encourage them. In the bleak early weeks of June, Lord Halifax saw little hope in continuing the struggle, and more advantage to be gained from a diplomatic solution. It is easy to agree with Lukacs that had Halifax rather than Churchill succeeded Chamberlain as Prime Minister, Hitler's calculation would have proved

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correct. Fortunately, Halifax had stepped aside.

This brings us to the "duel" of Lukacs's title. The duel between Churchill and Hitler was a duel between two men trying to second-guess each other's thoughts and foil each other's strategies. No one has told this aspect of the war's history as convincingly as Lukacs, and no one has entered more profoundly into the contrasting mental worlds of the protagonists. Indeed, this double portrait is a near masterpiece, missing full mastery only because it ignores—deliberately—a substantial part of the surrounding scene.

On the one side, Lukacs recounts Churchill's determination. At the center of Churchill's struggle was his refusal to accept the case for peace, even though he may well have privately had the same doubts as did Halifax about Britain's capacity to survive. Domestically, the Prime Minister needed to read the mood of the English people, respond to it, and alter it. For the English, "political, if not altogether social, democracy, with its parliamentary government, had made their leaders dependent on their moods." Internationally, the strategy depended on securing American involvement, and winning Roosevelt away from the destructive and defeatist advice of Ambassador Joseph Kennedy. In both cases, Churchill's fundamental assets were will, confidence, and resolve.

On the other side, there was Hitler's vision, which was not unlike that attributed to Churchill by Lukacs. Hitler, too, needed a psychological victory in order to prepare a real one. Ultimately, his gamble failed because, according to Lukacs, he made a miscalculation during those decisive Eighty Days. Hitler's mistake stemmed from his interpretation of English domestic politics. He believed that there were two factions in Britain: a war faction and a peace faction. He hoped that he might promote the interests of the latter by skillful manipulation, by exaggerating both the benefits of compliance and the risks of defiance. This psychological gambit was behind the German decision to pause outside Dunkirk to prevent the complete destruction of the British expeditionary force; it helps explain the flurry of German diplomatic initiatives in the aftermath of the fall of France; and it was in the end also the reason that Hitler involved the Soviet Union in the war. "Thus Hitler wished to impress, not only himself, not only his generals, but also—at least indirectly—the outside world that the time for peace was near. . . . The notion that the war might be coming to an end was filtering through the Nazi hierarchy." Lukacs adds that the so-called "Madagascar scheme" to transport European Jews to Africa was a product of this 1940 peace initiative.

Hitler's plan was in essence the calculation of the naïve outsider: when we are faced by a political system and a power structure we cannot fully comprehend, we divide it into hawks and doves. Conciliation should strengthen the doves; harshness should provoke the hawks. According to this way of thinking, being kinder to Britain would push out Churchill and bring in Halifax and the veteran appeasers.

The idea was not farfetched. In the 1930s, many foreign observers had taken this approach to the hierarchy of Hitler's Germany: would not moderation promote the cause of the moderates, of a Hjalmar Schacht and later a Hermann Goering? Churchill's anti-appeasement position had meant a consistent rejection of such an approach to understanding German (and later Russian) politics. For him, National Socialism represented an ideologically driven and fundamentally self-consistent campaign for expansionism.

Churchill had the strategical advantage of not being taken in by any crude schema of hawk-dove analysis. He knew that Hitler's regime was radical and revolutionary. Lukacs believes that this is the significance of the struggle between the two leaders: "a great statesman prevailed over a great revolutionary; the writer over the orator; a cosmopolitan over a racist; a democratic aristocrat over a populist demagogue; a traditionalist over a radical; a patriot over a nationalist."

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But both were Europeans: a European aristocratic reactionary guided by noblesse oblige, and a European parvenu driven by fanatical resentment.

In other words, Lukacs rejects the idea —which currently passes for orthodoxy in the historical profession—that National Socialism was fundamentally a radical conservative response to Bolshevism. He rejects the idea that an anti-Communist crusade, linked to a racial war against Slavs and Jews, was the essence of Hitler's program from his dictation of *Mein Kampf* in Landsberg prison to the unleashing of Operation Barbarossa. The Hitler who emerges here is rather the man depicted with obsessional detail and lascivious admiration in the diaries of Propaganda Minister Dr. Joseph Goebbels: the Fuehrer who thought that he had outwitted the intellectually stunted and feeble-willed politicians of the old order and the traditional right—the Papens, Schleichers, Hugenbergs—and who would now impose his own will with equal determination and resolve on an equally corrupt and degenerate European old order. Churchill for Hitler and Goebbels stood, in his pink silk underwear (an item of haberdashery that apparently exercised a great fascination over the mind of Hitler's propagandist), as a symbol of the effete and degenerate world of the old European ruling classes. A radical nationalism would recast Germany domestically: it would eliminate "Jewish influence" and build a new state that would dominate the European continent. It would be a triumph of Nazi will, and of Hitler's own will.

John Lukacs believes in a self-consciously old-fashioned history: an account of events made by people, rather than by abstract material forces. "All this," he writes in one of his rare truly ugly sentences,

> gives the lie to the determinist and social-scientific (and, at least in one sense, democratic) philosophy of the modern world, according to which history is "made" by material conditions and institutions and their organization, and no longer formed by the thoughts, words and acts (in sum, by the character: in itself an old-fashioned word, eschewed by political scientists and sociologists) of outstanding men.

We are here, Lukacs makes quite clear, in a world of power politics at a level of games between personalities, not in the complicated bureaucratic world of intelligence assessments and endless statistics about aircraft production or shell capabilities.

This was certainly the mental world of Hitler, who came to believe more and more—in the face of an external reality that increasingly threatened his empire—that wars were great psychic struggles in which the stronger will prevailed. Lukacs admires Hitler's "insightful contempt for the idea of Economic Man." Ultimately, in Hitler's world view, resolve and determination were what counted: and propaganda—the instrument by which he had defeated the German politicians of the old right—could win in international combat. In the last stages of the war, Goebbels insisted on referring to a machine capable of hurling propaganda leaflets over long distances as a secret weapon of victory, and on using hundreds of German soldiers to make a full-color film glorifying resistance to the foreign invader.

Churchill, who ultimately had a much better grasp on reality, knew that technology and economic superiority mattered as much as the personal game, the duel. Finally, he was a more modern, more rational, and a less antiquely noble and gentlemanly figure than Lukacs's portrait would suggest. He participated actively and skillfully in a recasting of the world: in the organization of wartime industry, in the evaluation of new intelligence sources, in making deals with Labour leaders, and—in addition—in playing the fundamentally altered game of Great Power politics. Roosevelt and Stalin—and thus the end of the "European War"—played necessary roles in his concept of how the Nazi menace might be defeated: largely because he thought more in terms of what he rightly perceived as realities than in terms of propaganda images.

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Shorter notices

Maryvonne de Saint Pulgent
Le Syndrome de l'Opéra.
Laffont (Paris), 359 pages, 110 FF paper

A Swiftian chronicle of the new Paris Opéra-Bastille by a brilliantly caustic Parisian writer who is herself a musician. Opera itself, she shows, is in crisis. After postwar glory years of worldwide expansion, the major houses are subsidy-eating monsters (they were almost all private until World War II); the repertoire is small and unreplenishable; *metteurs en scène* and singers lord it. A look back at the history of the form in France reveals it always a court bijou: Louis XIV had Lully; Marie Antoinette, Glück. Nothing changed when the Palais Garnier (as we now must call the Opéra) opened in 1875. The new royalty—bankers, nabobs of industry, jewelers, lawyers, doctors—proudly elbowed the Proustian faubourg. Opera has always drawn the newly rich and powerful, as it does today in the Far East.

Cut to 1981. Mitterrand is the new Sun King. If Pompidou had his Beaubourg and Giscard his Orsay, Mitterrand must have two, three, many Grand Projects. And they must be socialist. Culture Minister Jack Lang, Mitterrand's Malraux, lets it be known the Garnier is "elitist," not socialist. There must be a new socialist opera at . . . at . . . why, at the Bastille, of course. And it must be ready by July 1989 for the Bastille Bicentennial (Lang is also Minister of the Bicentennial). With gustatory pleasure Mme de Saint Pulgent takes us through the ten-year parturition of the monster. No one thought out what "popular opera" might be. Only mediocrities dared compete in the architectural race; Canadian Carlos Ott was chosen by committee and instantly adopted a touchy grandeur (caught from his masters). He proceeded to raze some fine seventeenth-century houses and to rear a (take your choice) mall, hospital, German air terminal, refrigerator, rhinoceros. Irony: the cramped Garnier could easily have been expanded.

As for the interior, a scene of high farce worthy of Juvenal records the unique intervention by the Monarch in the mess he had authorized. What color will the seats be? One faction is for blue. No, says another, that was the Bourbons' color, they must be red. No, says Ott, that is too bourgeois, they must be black. Mitterrand arrives and listens gravely to the competing claims. Silence. The verdict: "Indeed, black is a real color. It will be black." Trumpets. Departure.

As for the music, there was chaos. Musical director Daniel Barenboim accrued power until Mitterrand appointed couturier crony and lightweight Pierre Bergé President of the Opéra. Bergé began to issue dicta about Verdi being "popular" and Mozart and Wagner not. Barenboim laughed and was fired. Scandal. The thing limped into existence in March 1990 with a *Troyens* featuring falling scenery. The President was not in attendance. It had cost the earth, whilst unemployment in socialist France soared. It had provided a priceless example of socialist monarchy at work.

Mme de Saint Pulgent's latest crusade is against the even more monumentally misconceived TGB (Très Grande Bibliothèque), wherein will be stored copies of all books ever published in France. They will be stored in a sunlit tower . . . or maybe better underground. And it shall be free to all . . . or maybe not. Well, the Anglo-Saxons have their Library of Congress and British Library, do they not? Oh, yes, and it must be finished by 1995, before the end of the second term of the President!

—*Donald Lyons*

Walker Percy Signposts in a Strange Land.
Edited, with an introduction, by Patrick Samway. Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
428 pages, $25

Walker Percy had been writing essays for over a decade before his first novel, *The Moviegoer*, established the doctor-turned-writer as a literary presence. Some of his early essays appeared in the 1975 volume *The*

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Message in the Bottle, and now, a year after his death, a large collection of assorted prose, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, brings together more early essays, later ones from sundry academic journals and literary magazines (including *The New Criterion*), and still others previously unpublished.

As Percy's work is remarkably consistent in tone and topic—personal, informal but serious, nearly all his essays belonging to the "Reflections on . . ." genre—readers of *The Message in the Bottle* and his six novels will find most of the terrain covered in this new book quite familiar. Many of these pieces, like many of the novels, address what can only be called the meaning of human existence, and, in particular, the inability of science to tell us much about what most concerns us: "what it is like to be born a man or woman, to live, and to die." Following the pragmaticist philosopher Charles Peirce (d. 1914), Percy sees the phenomenon of language as the key to human nature and evidence of man's spirituality. This same theme, presented in somewhat technical language, is the gist of *The Message in the Bottle* (appropriately subtitled "How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other").

Percy's career as a "Catholic novelist" is the topic of several essays. In 1941, while an intern at Bellevue, Percy contracted tuberculosis. Several years in a sanatorium reading Russian novels and existentialist philosophy dramatically redirected Dr. Percy's life: in 1947 he became a Roman Catholic (it was Kierkegaard's essay "On the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle" that convinced him to convert); he also decided to forsake medicine for writing. The Catholicism at work in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, however, is less theology than anthropology, a traditional Judeo-Christian view of the human condition that is not uniquely Roman Catholic. Percy steadfastly avoids the doctrinal and apologetical themes that figure so prominently in the letters of a Southern Catholic writer whom Percy revered, Flannery O'Connor.

The only unexpected essays collected here are Percy's commentaries on the politics and society of his native South. (Born in Alabama, Percy was raised in Georgia and Mississippi by his Uncle Will, the writer William Alexander Percy, whose home was a cultural crossroads of the deep South.) Written during the racial conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s, these commentaries grapple with the South's perverse coupling of "kindliness and unspeakable violence," which Percy blames on two related phenomena. The first was the inability of the Southern gentry to bring true justice to blacks and the consequent demise of the peculiar but long-standing alliance between upper-class Southerners and blacks. Because they tended to see morality as strictly person-to-person, a matter of personal honor, many for whom it was unthinkable to mistreat a Negro also found "social" or "racial" justice unthinkable. Related to this was the absence of what Percy calls a "public zone" in the South, even in nominally public schools: "The whole of the Delta, indeed of white Mississippi . . . is like one big front porch," he writes. Thus, "when James Meredith finally did walk the paths of Ole Miss, his fellow students cursed and reviled him. But they also wept with genuine grief. It was as if he had been quartered in their living room."

Attacked in a Northern magazine for demanding desegregation while simultaneously praising the Southern tradition, Percy defended his position. "The South is a conservative society which openly practices segregation," Percy wrote in 1957. "Segregation is both sinful and illegal. Political conservatism is neither sinful nor illegal—though sometimes one wonders if liberals don't think it is."

The essays here reveal an immensely decent man—sensible, observant, somewhat melancholic, wry. Reflecting on his fortieth wedding anniversary, he concludes, "There is no secret, or rather the secrets are buried in platitudes. That is to say, it has something to do with love, commitment, and family. As to the institution, it is something like Churchill's description of democracy: vicissitudinous yes, but look at the alternatives."

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It is possible that Percy, who started out as an essayist, will one day be remembered more for his essays than for his novels. Certainly he seems, in the end, to have been a man with ideas to expound rather than stories to tell. He turned to fiction-writing, he says, in order to "novelize philosophy" in the manner of Sartre and Camus. Perhaps the essential Walker Percy is not the novelist of *The Moviegoer* or *Love in the Ruins* but the philosophical essayist of *The Message in the Bottle* and *Signposts in a Strange Land*.

—*John Wauk*

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication of *Out of Eden: Essays on Modern Art*, by W. S. Di Piero (University of California Press, $29.95), and *Rescue the Perishing*, poems by Gibbons Ruark (Louisiana State University Press, $14.95; $7.95 paper). Parts of these collections first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Notebook

Pater and Wilde: aestheticism and homosexuality

by Louis Auchincloss

The pictures of Walter Pater (1839-1894) as a don at Brasenose College in Oxford that have come down to us from his contemporaries show little variation. We see clearly enough the high receding forehead and the bright, near-together eyes, the pale homely face and the moppy moustache, and we follow the ascetic, slightly stooped figure in its quick, shoulder-swinging walk from the lecture room or the chapel (where he would remain kneeling in the deepest reverence throughout the sacrament) to his two small chastely furnished rooms, painted in greenish white, their decor confined to three or four line engravings and a bowl of dried rose leaves. One thinks of his answer to a parlor game question of what animal he would have chosen to have been could he not have been human: "A carp swimming forever in the green waters of a royal château." Perhaps he had almost achieved it.

In these rooms he would receive with grave and patient kindness the students whose papers he would take to the window seat with a "Well, let us see what this is all about." And here in contented solitude he would compose the beautiful books and essays which would bring him ultimately the fame that was at times as agitating as it was dear.

All of which does not mean, of course, that Pater did not seethe inwardly, not only with the famous "hard gem-like flame" that he urged his readers to seek but with less ethereal fires. Indeed, his lyrical outbursts on the subject of naked male beauty seem positive indications of homosexual feeling, however repressed in his daily existence, and have been widely taken as such in our day.

Thomas Wright, whose startling two-volume biography of Pater appeared in 1907, attempted to show his subject as less inhibited than generally supposed. He had not known Pater himself, and the latter's two adoring if rather spectral maiden sisters had refused to help him, but Wright got hold of one Richard C. Jackson, a rich Oxford scholar who owned a large estate with a private chapel in Camberwell, where Pater, apparently a constant visitor, was able to wear "his heart upon his sleeve." Jackson, handsome, young, and devout, clad in the black garb of the Augustine canons and calling himself "Brother à Becket," provided Pater, according to Wright, not only with the great love of his life but with the model for Marius the Epicurean. Jackson had even boasted in verse to Pater:

> You greet me as your Marius! Me
> Who swelled for your life's minstrelsy in ivor towers.
> I say to thee,
> Within my garden I enclose
> Your spirit with a damask rose
> Of ivor towers.

Could the author of the famous rhapsody on Mona Lisa in *The Renaissance* have suffered this effusion without wincing? I think

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it possible. Jackson's naïve, emotionally charged, but perhaps chaste high-church group may have provided Pater with a haven where he could express his love for his handsome friend without the implications of sodomy that his Oxford world would surely have drawn and from which he himself may well have shrunk back in fear and dismay.

In *Marius the Epicurean* Pater found his true medium, which would be neither the essay nor fiction but a combination of both. The novel's hero, a deeply meditative aristocrat in the day of the later Antonines, the golden age when, according to Gibbon, the empire comprehended the fairest part of the earth and the most civilized portion of mankind, lives until the very end of his story a life almost entirely of the mind. For him, as with his creator, the temptations of the world do not come as a longing for love—to be with "Cynthia or Aspasia"—but as a thirst for an existence in exquisite places. Some of his youthful emotions may be directed toward the beautiful poet Flavian and toward the handsome but dispassionate centurion Cornelius, but his final goal is chastity, "the most beautiful thing in the world and the truest conservator of the creative energy." Here we may have Pater's own credo: never to mix together the flesh and the spirit or make the matter of a heavenly banquet serve for earthly meat or drink.

Women, of course, were not the danger. It was the couplings of men that Pater feared and detested, like the mating of the writhing snakes which so appalled his hero and which he may have associated with the lustful empress Faustina borne in her closed litter to the park where the athletes strip. Pater might have agreed with Arthur C. Benson, who described even the mild homoerotic gestures of affection offered by Henry James to younger men as "the slobbering osculations of elderly men with false teeth." Born with desires unacceptable to society and to himself, Pater attempted to sublimate them into his art.

And did he not succeed? I do not know if such things are capable of sublimation, but I suspect that industry and concentration, fostered by a monastic existence, may have been some help in achieving his aim of writing the most graceful and mellifluous prose of his day. And I have little doubt that this brought him a very intense happiness as well.

Marius, as a lad, has a brooding sense that he must train himself for some great occasion of self-devotion which should consecrate his life, as martyrdom stamps the seal of worth on a Christian's. And in the end of his tale this indeed comes, when he and Cornelius are arrested by soldiers on an anti-Christian raid, and he contrives his friend's release, himself remaining, on the plea of seeking counsel in Rome. Marius is not actually martyred; dying of fever and exhaustion on a forced march, he is left to expire on the roadside in the care of some country people who turn out to be Christians and who administer the last rites.

In the passages of Marius's last moments we learn first of his gratitude for the goodly vision with which his life has been blessed—one long unfolding of the beauty and energy of things. "Vixi!" he can indeed exclaim. But this is followed by his rueful sense of perhaps wasted powers, by the dismal apprehension that extinction will terminate a life which has been nothing but a passage of sweet music, from dying hour to dying hour, sufficient only to itself. And then he has a gleam of a Christian afterlife.

But only a gleam. We are not sure, as Marius succumbs amid the chants of "Abi! Abi! Anima Christiana!", that his is quite that. The inference might even be drawn that he does not really wish anything to be substituted for a mind or soul which has dwelt so happily with beauty. Perhaps he is content to die with Keats's aphorism from "Ode on a Grecian Urn" on his lips. We may remember that Pater himself once wondered what sort of man would be willing to change the curve or color of a rose leaf for the colorless, formless, intangible being that Plato placed so high.

The eponymous hero of *Sebastian van Storck* may be even closer to his creator than

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Marius. This grave young Dutchman of the seventeenth century rejects all positive things, friends, family, riches, and the love of a fine woman, to brood instead over the thought of the earth under his feet cooling down forever from its old cosmic heat. Yet people love Sebastian; his intellectual melancholy, like Hamlet's, gives a bodily sweetness to all he says and does. Life to him is but the troublesome surface of the one absolute mind, a passing vexatious thought or uneasy dream, and he yearns to put aside the picturesque world of Dutch art and Dutch reality and die to self in an eternal nothingness which he likens to the dead level of a glacial and lonely sea under a pallid Arctic sky. In the end Sebastian is drowned in a beach house by a mammoth tide, but his last act is to save the life of a child, so, like Marius's, his story ends on a faint note of redemption and hope. But only a faint one. Never has a sense of beauty been more hauntingly identified with its very evanescence.

The young Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), who had hailed Keats as his idol in poetry and who had literally prostrated himself before the grave of the young bard in Rome, was quick to proclaim Pater as his master in what the latter had persuaded him was the more difficult literary form. "Pater," Wilde told a friend, "is the only man in the century who can write prose." But the author of *Marius* was made uneasy by the noisy adulation of his disciple and complained of the "strange vulgarity" that Wilde took for charm. It seems likely that he feared that Wilde's public posturing and unabashed eulogizing of "Greek love" would bring down the wrath of the public on all who might be branded with the term "aesthete." For what to a philistine was the difference between aestheticism and pederasty? And indeed, after the trial and conviction of Wilde, the chorus of the press would express the growl: "So *this* is what art makes of a man! We thought as much!" Pater, at any rate, would escape all this, for he died prior to Wilde's suit against the Marquis of Queensberry.

Wilde's notoriety was gained well before he had written the works for which he is famed today: his essays "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist"; his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; his four great comedies; and *De Profundis*. His earlier reputation was made by his widely publicized American lecture tour. To amuse or even anger his audiences he took deliberate advantage of the popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, a parody of the aesthetic movement, to pose as a real-life Bunthorne and to exalt beauty for beauty's sake over drab middle-class morality and conventionalism. But the irony of his career was that he gained a more enduring eminence in the memory of men by the tragedy of his public disgrace and imprisonment than by all the seeming frivolity that preceded it, a frivolity which was often a mask to cover a deeper wit and philosophy.

But was it really irony? He wrote to Alfred Douglas in *De Profundis*: "Nothing really at any period of my life was ever of the smallest importance compared with art." And he insisted that he had made the trivial in thought and action the keystone of the philosophy expressed in his plays and paradoxes. But as he also admitted that he had tired at last of the hedonistic life he had led with Douglas, it seems possible that his near lunatic persistence in prosecuting Lord Queensberry for calling him, at least by implication, a homosexual, when he knew what incriminating evidence could be flung back at him by the defense, may have been a despairing need to endow with a dramatic seriousness a life at least open to the charge of inconsequence. He later went so far as to speculate that his friendship with Douglas may have been the prelude to what had been basically from the start a "symphony of sorrow, passing through its rhythmically-linked movements to its certain resolution, with that inevitableness that in Art characterizes the treatment of every great theme."

In this fashion, writing *after* the debacle, he was able to turn the whole sordid matter into a tragedy of Greek dimensions, obscuring in a Platonic eulogy the boy prostitutes,

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the bibulous parties in hotel brothels, and even the fecal stains on sheets produced as police evidence of sodomy. Think what Pater would have thought of the latter! But never mind. Wilde thus accomplished a remarkable feat in literary history: that of fusing his works with his biography, so that they seem to many readers a single work of art. One even wonders if either his writings or his purgatory would be quite so famous today without the assistance that each lends to the other.

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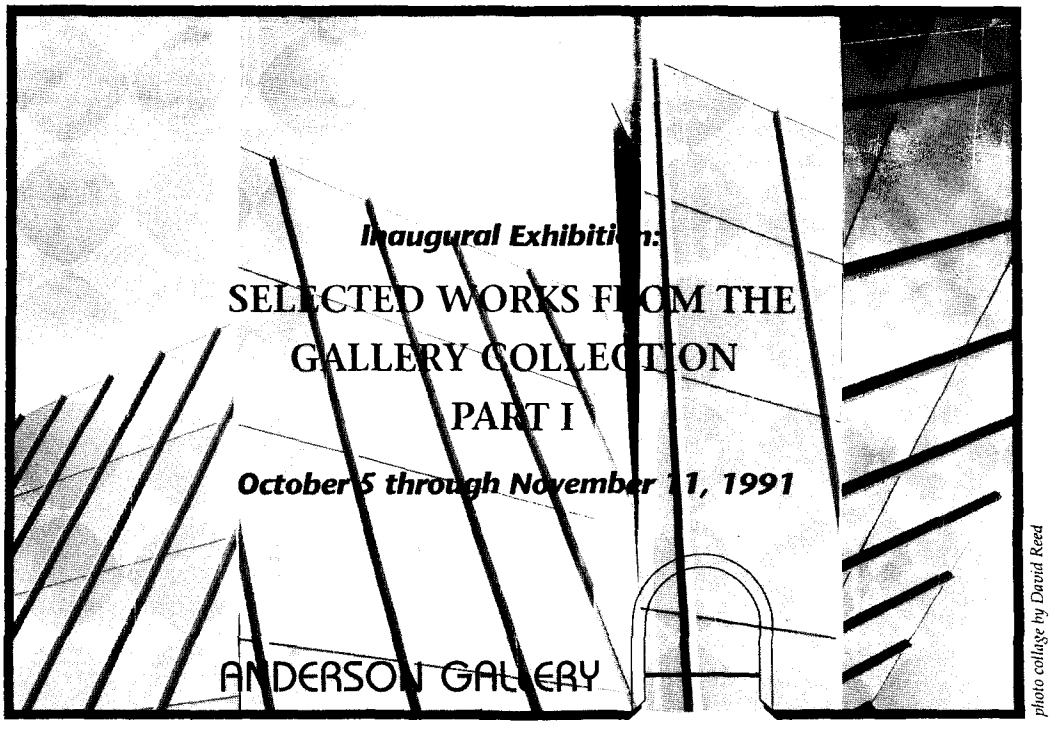

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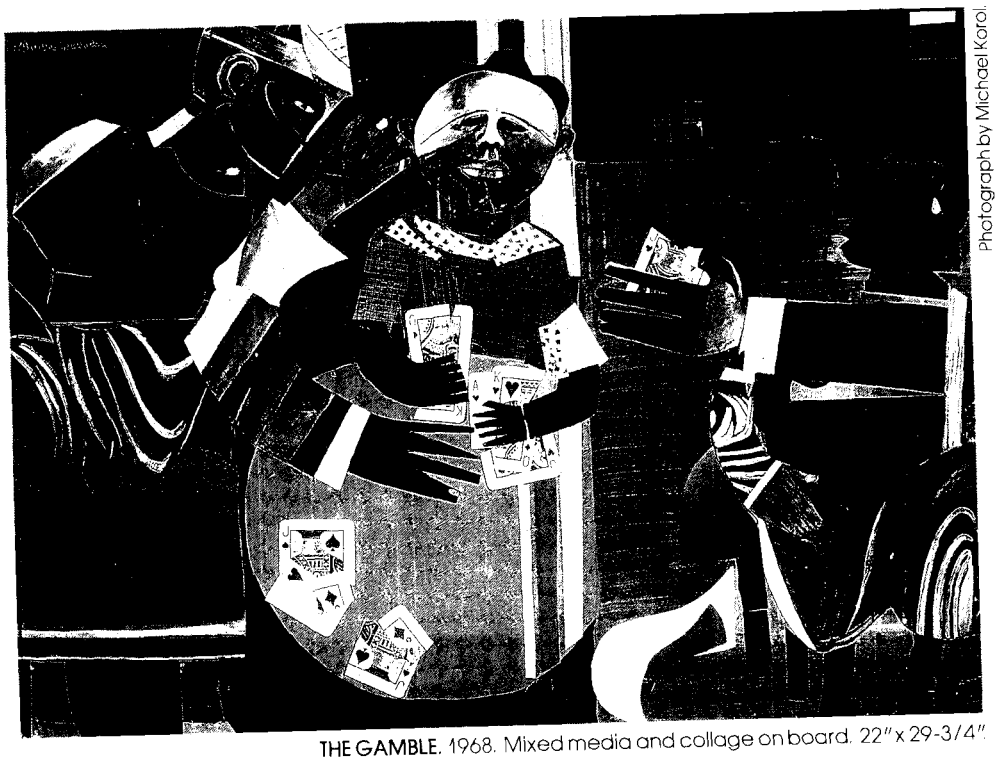

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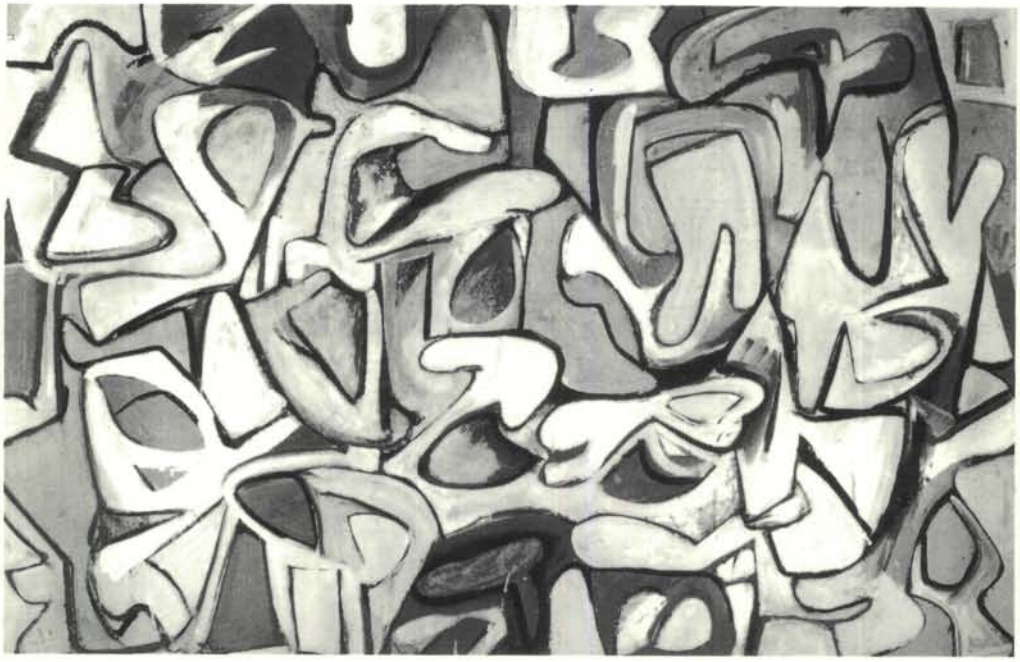

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